Conscience, ethics and politics: beyond beautiful souls.

Rachel Elizabeth Greene
Peterhouse

Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Undertaken in the Faculty of Divinity,
University of Cambridge.

Submitted January 2019.

Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Divinity Degree Committee.

SIGNED:

Conscience, ethics and politics: beyond beautiful souls.

Rachel Elizabeth Greene

Abstract

This thesis examines the conceptual and practical difficulties posed by the use of conscience. In order to address those difficulties, it looks at the figure of the beautiful soul in romantic literature as an important resource with which to re-assess the problem of conscience. To show how this thesis stages a conversation between three thinkers: Charles Taylor, Gillian Rose and Rowan Williams. I offer a critical survey of efforts to respond to the difficulties that conscience presents, before examining Taylor's work on moral inarticulacy and secularity, so as to contextualize the problem of conscience and show why people are pressured to rely on conscience as a moral principle despite the problem. Then I introduce the beautiful soul as a compelling depiction of what it feels like to organize your life by following your conscience. I focus first on the story of the beautiful soul in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, in order to build up a picture of the key movements in the beautiful soul's understanding of conscience as an expression of individuality and to see why cultivating a beautiful soul might be a modern temptation. Then I consider the story of the beautiful soul in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which interrogates individuality as a justified norm and indicates how we might avoid the temptation to cultivate a beautiful soul. Next I examine Gillian Rose's claim that Hannah Arendt succumbed to that temptation. I argue that Rose's claim has its basis in Arendt's struggle to rework the concept of conscience after the trial of Eichmann. I return to Taylor's proposal that we take a theological approach in this secular age and set out the distinctive features of conscience, drawing up the insights of Rowan Williams. This thesis argues that the beautiful soul issues two important warnings about conscience. With regards to efforts to theorize conscience, the beautiful soul offers a salient reminder that conscience is formal and that its formalism always has the potential to undermine its purported morality. With regards to the use of conscience in practice, the beautiful soul warns of serious pitfalls associated with responding to ethical and political issues as if they were personal matters that could be addressed by curating your life according to conscience. It is still possible to make public appeal to your conscience and avoid the fate of the beautiful soul, but only if we heed these two warnings. That means we must not assume conscience to be a self-explanatory moral principle, and we must resist treating it as a single, weighty decision for or against institutional life without considering the virtues, social practices, and institutions shaping it.

Preface

At the completion of this long project I would like to thank a number of people without whose support and encouragement this simply would not have been possible. I give special thanks to Rowan Williams, Jeremy Morris and Ben Quash. In supervising different phases of this project, they were close readers and invaluable conversation partners. I owe a particularly large debt of gratitude to Rowan Williams for asking the sort of questions that spurred me to begin this piece of research on the contemporary relevance of the beautiful soul and for providing the enthusiasm for the project that spurred me to finish it.

I owe a great debt to my friends and am especially grateful for conversations with Sharon Jones, Sarah Mortimer, John Hughes, Matthew Bullimore, Tony Baker, Sarah Apetrei, Robyn Whitaker, Philip McCosker, Miranda Champion, Catalina Ocampo and Katharina Franz. Others who read sections of this work and provided helpful comments include Ann Greene, Bonnie Chang, Brian Clampitt, Christina Bosch and Rachel Neaum. Friends such as these ensured that the impasses of the thinking process and the isolation of the writing process were offset by solidarity and moments of joy. Finally, I dedicate this work to my husband, David Neaum, my mother, Ann Greene, and my son Thomas Neaum, who showed me that it could be done.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The beautiful soul is a literary figure that gained widespread popularity in the eighteenth century through poems, plays, novels, autobiographical works and philosophical reflections. The beautiful soul is known by her intense feelings, her moral purity and her refusal of limits, which defines the scope of her involvement in the institutions that make up social and political life. Above all, the beautiful soul is a creature of conscience. This soul longs for a way of being in the modern world that does not contribute to its ills and endeavors to find a way of living that brings her actions into alignment with her beliefs. So, the beautiful soul focuses on what she personally, individually, can do to manage her moral responsibilities, thereby enacting many of the struggles of living in accord with one's conscience. Following the struggles of the beautiful soul is meant to be formative and instructive, both for her as she writes about the difficulties she faces and for those who read her record of it. The figure of the beautiful soul therefore offers herself up self-consciously, as a resource for thinking about the meaning, function and significance of conscience.

Three scholars of Hegel–Charles Taylor, the late Gillian Rose and Rowan Williams–have looked at facets of the beautiful soul tradition and at the ethical and political discourses that frame the problem of conscience. Putting their work side by side offers tantalizing suggestions about what we might learn about conscience from the beautiful soul; however, this has not yet been done. In fact, the literature on the history of conscience has taken almost no notice of figure of the beautiful soul or her cautionary tale. The aim of this thesis is to stage a conversation between these three thinkers so that the problem of conscience can be re-assessed in light of the beautiful soul.

I offer a critical survey of recent efforts to provide a history of conscience and to give new definition to conscience, characterizing the ways scholars have sought to respond to the difficulties posed by conscience and demonstrating why those efforts fall short. Moreover, these efforts do not adequately contend with two aspects of conscience that need to be held in tension: its normativity and its formalism (chapter I). Conscience is normative in that it sets a standard for making judgments about what behavior is good or permissible for a person. And conscience is formal, or empty, because it does not contain, in and of itself, anything about standard it sets. The problem of conscience, with which current approaches to conscience do not adequately contend, is that the formalism of conscience has the

potential to undermine the morality of conscience. To put it another way, claims of conscience refer to a particular experience of moral obligation, but because of their formalism, claims of conscience are not comprised of anything that could confirm the obligation is in fact moral. A new approach to the problem of conscience is needed.

I then turn to Charles Taylor's account of moral inarticulacy and of secularism. Going over Taylor's work in these areas allows me to situate the problem of conscience within the unresolved debates of modernity (chapter II). Extrapolating from Taylor's work, I show why people are pressured to rely on conscience as a moral principle despite the difficulties it poses and the need for a new approach (chapter II).

The figure of the beautiful soul offers important warnings about undertaking this. So before delineating the form that a new approach to conscience should take, I turn to the figure of the beautiful soul and its depiction of conscience. My aim in examining the morality tales in which the beautiful soul figures is to bring into full view the possibilities and pitfalls of conceptualizing conscience and of making claims of conscience in public discourse. I focus first on the story of the beautiful soul narrated by Goethe, which portrays what generating ethical ideals and moral practices out of nothing but one's own mind or will entails (chapter III). My reading of Goethe's narration aims to build up a picture of the key movements in the beautiful soul's understanding of conscience and of the key moments in her attempts to live by conscience alone. I proceed in some detail in order to provide a counterbalance to the abstraction of later representations of the beautiful soul.

After establishing how the conscience of the beautiful soul is figured in my reading of Goethe, I turn to the phenomenology of the beautiful soul narrated by Hegel. Of particular importance is the way in which Hegel has the beautiful soul interrogate individual conscience as a justified norm (chapter IV). My reading of Hegel examines how the project of cultivating a beautiful soul offers a way of framing a particular matter as a moral issue when one is unable or unwilling to engage with it as a political issue. My reading also clarifies why Hegel believed that project to be futile and self-defeating.

In opening up these cautionary tales about the conscience of the beautiful soul, I seek to uncover why cultivating a beautiful soul is seen as a perennial modern temptation. To that end, I provide a critical assessment of Hannah Arendt's efforts to rework the concept of

conscience, before turning to consider Gillian Rose's indictment of Arendt as having a beautiful soul (chapter V). Here again the figure of the beautiful soul stands as a warning about the dangers of treating conscience as a private matter that can be separated from politics and ethics. It also stands as a warning about assuming conscience to be a single, weighty decision without giving due consideration to the practices, dispositions and virtues that shape what decisions come before conscience.

For a new approach to the problem of conscience, I return to Charles Taylor's claim that we need to consider moral motivations with sources that transcend the human sphere. Allowing for strong moral motivations gives us a starting place for developing a more theologically informed understanding of conscience. To show how this understanding of conscience might begin to take shape, I draw upon the theological perspective of Rowan Williams to set out the key features of conscience that need to be developed (chapter VI). In conclusion I argue that in this historical moment when the temptation to cultivate a beautiful soul is evident, and men and women are increasingly falling back on conscience as a privileged source of moral authority, public appeals of conscience will continue to be problematic. Nevertheless, continuing to develop the concept of conscience along the lines laid out here give us an alternative to cultivating our self-images as beautiful souls.

I

Conscience and its complexities: formalism and normativity

Introduction

> The history of conscience in the Western ethical tradition… is a moving, tortuous record of decline and fall which forces upon us in our time the frankest possible facing of a sharp alternative: either "do the conscience over" or "do the conscience in!" Ethical theory must either dispose of the conscience altogether or completely transform the interpretation of its ethical nature, function and significance.[1]

The problem of conscience–where it comes from, to what exactly it refers, how it justifies moral behavior, what authority it has and whether it even exists–has been debated for centuries. Conscience seems to be intrinsically problematic. It is problematic in the sense of arising in the context of moral dilemmas and difficulties and in the sense of calling into question settled norms and customs. It is also problematic in the sense of posing problems in both common speech and in moral, theological and political discourse.

At its most basic, conscience is the experience of being bound by a moral obligation. However, the nature of that experience, that is, the moral assessment at the center of a claim of conscience does not have a fixed structure that has existed always and everywhere. The concept of conscience as an ethical reality has been in currency for more than two thousand years, and in that time, it has been used to describe many different experiences. Consequently, there has never been one simple, settled understanding of conscience across history. In fact, the concept of conscience has shown remarkable proficiency in adapting to new circumstances and bearing new meanings.

Paul Lehmann described conscience as having a "tortuous" history, and his words are often repeated in the literature when analyses of the concept of conscience reveal an ambiguous, complicated and contested term. This chapter shows what often happens when scholars delve into the history of conscience in an effort to manage the problem of the conscience. I begin by assessing efforts to situate conscience in its semantic context, showing why they

[1] Paul Louis Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 327.

are unsatisfactory. Then I evaluate other approaches that extend beyond the semantics of conscience but do not extend far enough. My contention is that these approaches fail to provide sufficient resources to adequately analyze the ambiguities that have posed problems for conscience over the course of its history. Furthermore, these efforts to manage the ambiguity of conscience obscure two aspects of conscience which need to be held in tension: its formalism and its morality. This chapter concludes by assessing projects which attempt to do conscience over in light of other related, concepts, showing why those attempts do not address the problem head on.

Exclusively attending to the language of conscience

A common approach for handling the changes that conscience has undergone historically is to examine what has happened to the terminology of conscience. Tracing the history of the terms for conscience reveals a good number of the concept's tortuous paths. There have been many terms for conscience including *conscientia*, *syneidêsis* and *synderesis*. Moreover, that list of terms continues to expand, as different aspects of conscience are renamed, in an effort to clear up misunderstanding and reinterpret conscience to serve ethical theory, political life and the church as it enters new situations.

The hope of those who approach conscience this way is that by unpicking some of the semantic knots we can come to a fuller understanding of what conscience has meant in the past and should mean now. But unpicking the threads in the semantic knots will not necessarily produce an unambiguous concept free of conceptual tangles with which to work going forward. In fact, the language of conscience has been particularly resistant to such attempts at unpicking. Historians of conscience who try to study it lexically are often left to cherry pick among the various terms those which seem most ripe for reappraisal.

To take just one example of the contradictions in contemporary understanding of conscience that trouble scholars, we could turn to the Second Vatican Council documents, and in particular to *Gaudium et Spes.*[2] These documents articulate different views of

[2] Catholic Church, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium Et Spes* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1965).

conscience, some of which conflict, especially when compared with other official teachings.[3] On one hand, conscience is a synonym for personal responsibility and a subjective standard for action, which might give individuals authority to dissent from the teaching of the magisterium. This is a personalist reading of the documents.[4] On the other hand, conscience is a source of objective norms imposed on individuals who passively receive the moral law discovered in the depths of their souls. This is an ecclesialist reading of the documents.[5] Frustration with the contradictory uses of the concept of conscience in Second Vatican documents and the hope of finding a clear meaning for conscience with authority for Roman Catholic moral life has inspired many historical investigations into the terms used for conscience in earlier periods.

Those historical studies show that scholastic debate about conscience revolved principally around two words: *conscientia* and *synderesis*. *Synderesis* is a strange term that appears to have entered the discussion by means of an enigmatic passage in Jerome's commentary on the prophecy of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel's vision, four living creatures come out of a fiery cloud, each having the face of a human, a lion, an ox and an eagle. In the key passage of Jerome's commentary, he mentions several interpretations of Ezekiel's vision of the four living creatures, which read the faces as representing the structure of the human soul, before offering this explanation of them:

> These writers interpret the vision in terms of Plato's theory of the three elements of the soul. There are Reason, Spirit, and Desire; to these correspond respectively the man, the lion, and the ox. Now, above these three was the eagle; so in the soul, they say, above the other three elements and beyond them is a fourth, which the Greeks call *synderesis*. This is that spark of conscience which was not quenched even in the heart of Cain, when he was driven out of paradise. This it is that makes us, too, feel our sinfulness when we are overcome by evil Desire or unbridled Spirit, or deceived by sham Reason. It is natural to identify *synderesis* with the eagle, since it is distinct from the other three elements and corrects them when they err. This is that spirit which, as we read in Scripture, "intercedes for us with groans beyond all utterance."

---

[3] The 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (paragraphs 54-64) and the Catechesis (I.6) shows the same tension with respect to the primacy given to the law and the consideration given to the subject, the tension that can be seen in all the official documents that deal with conscience.

[4] For a presentation of the personalist view see Charles E. Curran, *Conscience* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2004); Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

[5] The ecclesial view is that the moral truth is primarily to be attained by conformity of one's conscience to the definitions put forth by the hierarchical teaching office. For a sample of writings that present the ecclesial view, see Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace: And Other Essays* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 84-111; Livio Melina, "Moral Conscience and *Communio*: Toward a Response to the Challenge of Ethical Pluralism," *Communio* 20, no. Winter (1992); John M. Haas, *Crisis of Conscience* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).

> "Who else can know a man's thoughts, except the man's own spirit that is within him?" This is that spirit which Paul prayed might be kept unimpaired with soul and body. And yet in some men we see this conscience overthrown and displaced; they have no sense of guilt or shame for their sins; as it is written, "Little the godless man recks of it, when he falls into sin's mire." They deserve the rebuke, "Still never a blush on thy harlot's brow."[6]

Jerome's reading of Ezekiel raised a number of interpretative problems.[7] It was unclear what medieval commentators should do with the terms *conscientia* and synderesis. *Synderesis* looked like the Greek word *syneidesis*, which is the standard correlate in Greek Patristic literature for the Latin *conscientia*, but the use of *conscientia* and *synderesis* in the passage seemed to imply a distinction between these terms. Jerome's text refers to *synderesis* as a spark from conscience's flame, which implies that they are different aspects of the same thing. However, the text also implies that they are different things, in that *synderesis* is something that could not be extinguished ("even in the heart of Cain"), whereas conscience could be extinguished (in, for instance, Israel who "falls into sin's mire" but feels no shame.) To complicate matters further, the text presents *synderesis* as something which exists "above and beyond" the other parts of the soul and is distinct from them. *Sydneresis* corrects anger, appetite and reason, moreover it is likened to a spirit that knows our thoughts and guides our reasoning. So is *synderesis* a part of the soul along with reason, spirit and desire, which would suggest it is a faculty akin to the faculties of reason, irascible appetite and concupiscible appetite? Or is it better understood as a guiding spirit or oracle? The confusion forced the Scholastics into a myriad of subtle reflections about the relation of this new term to conscience which ultimately developed into two treatises: one on *synderesis*, understood as the spark which illuminates conscience and cannot be extinguished, and the other on *conscientia*, understood as the fire itself, which might err by attaching itself to an object inferior to reason. In this way, the terms became rooted in the tradition.[8]

---

[6] This is Eric D'Arcy's translation. Eric D'Arcy, *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 16-7.

[7] In addition to the problems raised by the terminology, interpretation s muddied by what one scholar called "a blunder of remarkable proportions." Douglas Kries sheds light on this problem, which comes down to the fact that Jerome was not describing his own interpretation of conscience but Origin's - a fact which was overlooked by Scholastic commentators. So in a curious twist of fate, "Jerome, a great and sometimes vehement critic of Origen, passes on to the medieval period an account of his adversary's theory of conscience under the authority of his own illustrious name." Douglas Kries, "Origen, Plato, and Conscience (*Synderesis*) in Jerome's Ezekiel Commentary," *Traditio* 57 (2002): 83.

[8] For a detailed discussion of the development of these two treatises, see Timothy C. Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Philippe Delhaye and Charles Underhill Quinn, *The Christian Conscience* (New York: Desclee, 1968); Michael G. Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought (Leiden: Brill, 1977); Robert

Thomas Aquinas tried to clarify these treatises by treating *synderesis* as the habitus of the first principles of practical reason, where habitus is understood to be like an innate ability or disposition that enables one to grasp the basic truths of morality, and *conscientia* is an act of applying the first principles of practical reasoning to specific situations.[9] *Synderesis* became the unerring source of all judgments of conscience, which was indelibly inscribed within the human person, and *conscientia* became the application of *synderesis* in appraising acts we have carried out or will carry out. *Synderesis* was not extinguished by sin and could not err, whereas *conscientia* could be mistaken in its reasoning, presenting something that is objectively good as bad or the reverse.[10] Aquinas' association of *synderesis* with the grasp of the principles of natural law and conscience with the application of those principles to one's conduct clarified some of the ambiguities in the tradition. It also created interest in the binding nature of conscience, the problem of an erroneous conscience and of scrupulosity, the relation of conscience to the virtues and the relation of conscience to freedom that would fuel discussion and debate for centuries.[11] As the tradition of reflection on *conscientia* and *synderesis* grew, increasingly nuanced distinctions were drawn between the terms. Contemporary scholars assessing the tradition now conclude that for the Scholastics "the word [*synderesis*] means just what they made it up to mean."[12] Throwing all the emphasis on the language of conscience seems designed to deflect attention from the dynamics of power that surround whose claims of conscience are heard.

While the technical term *synderesis* does not feature in early modern Protestant discourse about conscience, the idea of innate moral knowledge did not vanish. Mika Ojakangas traces the idea through Stoic metaphors about seeds or biblical metaphors such as light and

---

J. Smith, *Conscience and Catholicism: The Nature and Function of Conscience in Contemporary Roman Catholic Moral Theology* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998).

[9] Timothy Suttor, *Summa Theologiae Man: Ia. 75-83*, vol. 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). ST I.79.12-13.

[10] Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae De Veritate* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952).q. 16-17; Thomas Gilby, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 18, Principles of Morality: 1a2ae. 18-21* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).ST I.19.5-6.

[11] For excellent examinations of Aquinas' treatment of conscience that detail the mis-readings that are generated when historians focus on the terminology of conscience without examining the wider context of those terms, see Herbert McCabe, "Aquinas and Good Sense," *New Blackfriars* 67, no. 798 (1986); Servais Pinckaers, "Conscience and the Christian Tradition," in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); "Conscience and the Virtue of Prudence," in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); John R. Lamont, "Conscience, Freedom, Rights: Idols of the Enlightenment" *The Thomist* 73 (2009).

[12] Gilby, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 18, Principles of Morality: 1a2ae. 18-21*, 180 Appendix 15; Smith, *Conscience and Catholicism: The Nature and Function of Conscience in Contemporary Roman Catholic Moral Theology*, 19.

candle in the writings of Calvin, William Perkins, Cambridge Platonists, John Locke and Immanuel Kant.[13] The candle metaphor, which is thought to originate in Proverbs 20.27 ("the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord"), is particularly interesting for historians and genealogists to chase through commentaries on that passage. There "the candle of the Lord" metaphor becomes identified with synderesis, the inextinguishable spark which illuminates conscience and allows for innate perception of the difference between good and evil and other self-evident moral principles. Through identification with the candle of the Lord in man, *synderesis* is reinstated in the English Renaissance, through sermons and essays where its light illuminates right reason and moral truths.[14]

So where does this leave those tracing the filiation of terms, who are searching for clarity and precision in the language of conscience that might inform its current usage? Is *synderesis* the missing term that ought to be reintroduced in discussions of modern conscience for the sake of more precision and clarity? Perhaps so, but even those who wish to intentionally re-introduce *synderesis* into current debates concede that the word synderesis likely found its way into the tradition by accident. The glossae of Jerome's text, which introduced *synderesis* and which became the standard Medieval locus for discussions about conscience, is generally ascribed to a transcription mistake. It is thought that a scribe attempting to copy the word *syneidesis* accidently put down *synderesis* instead, resulting in this "massive error."[15] Those who try to make the best of the situation reason that although the introduction of *synderesis* was a mistake, it was a happy accident, and that continuing to differentiate between *conscientia* and *synderesis* can be productive to the degree that those labels help to distinguish between various meanings of conscience.[16] Whether one assesses the language of conscience as an extraordinary blunder or a boon to scholars who want to draw increasingly fine distinctions, tracing the terminology of conscience in order to pinpoint original meanings which might clear up current contradictions is a tortuous journey. It entails chasing a white rabbit through a labyrinth of false starts and dead ends.

---

[13] Mika Ojakangas, *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience* (London" Bloomsbury, 2013), 104-10.
[14] Ibid. See also Robert A. Greene, "Whichcote, the Candle of the Lord, and Synderesis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 4 (1991).
[15] Timothy E. O'Connell, "An Understanding of Conscience " in *Conscience: Readings in Moral Theology* ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 25.
[16] Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy*, 11.

Another problem with this approach is that a survey of the terminology of conscience alone does not tell a clear story of the development of the concept of conscience, as not every use of the word conscience refers to the ethical reality. Some of the terms for conscience signify conscious awareness in general and not any particular ethical awareness. For instance, we have seen conscience that comes from the Greek συνείδησις (*suneidesis*) and the Latin *conscientia*, which are compounds of the word "to know," *oida* and *scio*, and the prefix "with," *sun-* and *cum-*. In both the Greek and the Latin, conscience means "the state or act of knowing with" or "shared knowledge" conveying that conscience is the discernment of one's own wrongdoing or absence of wrongdoing. That knowledge may be shared with another in the sense of the context of relationship with others or that knowledge maybe shared with one's self, as a reflexive apprehension of one's own moral guilt or innocence.[17] However, the prefix might also work merely to intensify *oida* and *scio*, such that the compound word (*suneidesis* or *conscientia*) refers not to shared moral knowledge but to the state or act of knowing well, or simply to knowledge, intellectual awareness, mind or consciousness of (this or that).[18] It is only the context of the word that gives a clue as to whether or not the term is being used in an ethical sense or not. This has led to the creation of new terms to help indicate whether conscience refers to moral conscience or not. John Locke coined the term "consciousness" so as to distinguish between moral and non-moral conscience in English, Christian Wolff introduced the term *Bewusstsein* (consciousness) to make the distinction in German, and Leibniz tried to do the same in French by rendering consciousness as *consciosité* in his translation of Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding.[19]

---

[17] This ambiguity over the prefix *con-* and over the moral and non-moral senses of conscience continues to muddy the literature on the history of conscience, where confusion persists over how to interpret the *con-* of conscience etymologically. What is at stake is whether conscience is a knowledge of one's own fault shared with another, be that God or another person, and thus a concept that originally had a social dimension and reflected shared values, or whether conscience is an unshared opinion about one's own fault, and therefore an individualistic construct in origin. The former view of conscience as "moral knowledge shared with others" is more commonly held to be the standard interpretation, see for instance Robert K. Vischer, *Conscience and the Common Good: Reclaiming the Space between Person and State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther*, 24-25. Paul Strohm, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8, 10, 118. Michael Walzer, "Conscientious Objection," in *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[18] Lewis covers a number of pitfalls in interpreting references to conscience in his study of the term and its various shades of meaning. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 181-213.

[19] Ojakangas, *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience*, 30.

There is a further complication. Even if one takes into account all the terms used for conscience, one still needs to contend with the fact that there have been significant moments in the history of conscience when its meaning has been conveyed without recourse to the language of conscience. To offer just one example, the word for conscience does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Those who have gone looking for it end up end up searching for other words which carry some of the meaning of conscience and might be said to function analogously. One such term is the Hebrew word for "heart" (*lêb*). Heart was treated as the seat of moral life, as the site where God's commandments are interiorized, as the site where the memory of our acts is preserved, and as the site where contrition is felt for the wrongs we have committed.[20] It is therefore read as conveying some of the meaning of conscience. Another term that is treated as sharing in some of the work of conscience in the Hebrew Bible is the word *hokmâh,* translated as wisdom (*sapientia*) or prudence (*prudentia*) in the Vulgate. Wisdom and prudence are seen to play a role in moral judgment in that they refer to the knowledge of God's will, as well as the discernment of the moral order and of what will please God.[21] Subsequently, these terms became entwined with the concept of conscience.

A history of terms for conscience therefore needs to contend not only with an unwieldy and ever-expanding number of terms. It also needs to contend with the fact that the language of conscience does not always refer to the ethical decision-making and that furthermore the ethical decision making to which conscience does refer has been conveyed in different periods by use of other terminology that might be said to function in a similar manner. So, while lexical studies reveal some of the steps (and missteps) that have been taken, even the most comprehensive word search simply cannot tell the full story.

Downplaying conscience's conceptual framework

Examining the changing terminology, even if sensitive to the complexities above, is not a

[20] In the Old Testament the heart is not just figured as a place but also as a text or tablet. The reflections of conscience are inscriptions made by God the scribe upon the tablet of the heart. They constitute both an inner scripture containing the Law (a kind of internalized phylactery) and a book in which personal and collective sin and guilt are recorded to provide a moral account. St Paul and scholastic writers take up this heart-based terminology for conscience in Hebrew Scriptures and extend it to describe the moral record of the life of each individual. For more on conscience and the trope of the tablet of the heart, see Eric Jager's fascinating study. Erice Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[21] For a treatment of terms which function as analogues of conscience in the Christian tradition, see Delhaye and Quinn, *The Christian Conscience*, 51-68.

viable strategy for untangling the notion of conscience as it has evolved over time, because the meaning and the function of the terminology in any particular period depends not only upon the concept's semantic frameworks but also upon its conceptual framework. A conceptual framework forms the context in which the language of conscience was deployed. And the conceptual framework of conscience has not remained static.

Over its long history, the notion of conscience has developed conceptually within a number of moral thought worlds. Determining the specific meaning of the experience ascribed to conscience in any particular historical period requires mapping the wider moral context that frames it.[22] For instance, our understanding of conscience is bound up with our conception of the nature of moral knowledge and the nature of human freedom, as well with our conception of the common good and the nature of selfhood. As those conceptions have shifted, conscience also has shifted thereby performing different functions within different moral visions.[23] And those changes have not been superficial.[24] For that reason, conscience needs to be examined against its intellectual backdrop and not in isolation from other concepts that are determinative of its meaning.

In the fourth century, John Chrysostom described conscience as a court with an inner judge. Chrysostom said:

> There is no judge, no judge at all among men, as sleepless as our conscience. External judges are corrupted by money, influenced by flattery, and induced by fear to give false judgments; and many other factors spoil their upright decision. But the court of conscience cannot yield to any of these influences. Whether you give bribes, or flatter, or threaten, or do anything else, this court will bring forth a just judgment against your sinful intentions. He who commits sin himself condemns himself even if no one else accuses him. He does this not once only, or twice, but often, and continues through his whole life. Even if a long time passes, the conscience never forgets what has happened, but even during the commission of the sin, and before

[22] This is a point that Paul Lehmann made when he described conscience as "a concept in search of a context." Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, 344.

[23] As Christopher Steck reminds us, "the moral agent is embedded in a framework that shapes her moral reasoning, affectively and intellectually. Moral reasoning is always reasoning *within* (that is, within a moral framework, a religious worldview, and/or a set of ideological commitments." See Christopher Steck, "Re-Embedding Moral Agency," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 332-3. However, this point is frequently overlooked, especially when conscience is treated as an isolated phenomenon that could serve as the basis of common moral experience or a universalist anthropology.

[24] Here I dispute Ojakangas' thesis that there has been radical continuity in the Western tradition of conscience. Ojakangas, *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience*.

> and after it is committed, the conscience stands against us as a vehement accuser.[25]

Likewise, in the eighteenth century, Kant described conscience as consciousness of an internal court in man. Kant wrote:

> Every human being has a conscience and finds himself observed, threatened, and, in general, kept in awe (respect coupled with fear) by an internal judge; and this authority watching over the law in him is not something that he himself (voluntarily) makes, but something incorporated in his being. It follows him like a shadow when he plans to escape. He can indeed stun himself or put himself to sleep by pleasures and distractions, but he cannot help coming to himself or waking up from time to time; and when he does, he hears at once its fearful voice. He can at most, in extreme depravity, bring himself to heed it no longer, but he still cannot help hearing it.[26]

Kant and Chrysostom deploy the same metaphors, likening the thought process of conscience to an inner court with an inner judge whose verdicts one cannot escape from; however, Kant's use of conscience cannot simply be aligned with Chrysostom's use of it. Their conceptions of conscience are conditioned by very different understandings of "the judgment" involved, of "the law" being upheld and of the human agent. Nevertheless, these conceptual differences downplayed by theorists looking to establish that conscience has referred to the same core experience over time. So while their approaches extend beyond studying how conscience's semantic context has changed, insufficient attention is given to conscience's changing conceptual context.

Overlooking the social practices that make sense of conscience

Understanding the shifts in meaning that the notion of conscience has undergone does not only require studying conscience in light of the terms that contextualize it semantically and conceptually. It also requires an examination of the religious and political ideals and practices that undergird claims of conscience and to which they, in turn, lend support. For the very idea of conscience has at times been central to the unfolding of political events, in that views about conscience were expounded as part of a struggle in political and ecclesiastical politics, where views about conscience have shaped debates about freedom of

[25] John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 88.
[26] Immanuel Kant, *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 189. 6:438.

religion and the toleration or persecution of heretics and about the practice of making penitence for bad conscience–to take two examples from very different historical moments. Indeed, making a claim of conscience can be understood as a social practice in and of itself, one that has changed in step with the political and religious changes of modernity.[27]

The genealogical heirs to Nietzsche such as Foucault have underlined this point with their warnings about the distorting effects of blindness towards the dominant actual uses of moral concepts. Likewise, the work of some Thomistic Aristotelians such as Alasdair MacIntyre has also drawn attention to the social, political and cultural order in which forms of practical reasoning are embodied and institutionalized. They have stressed that trying to study moral concepts, such as conscience, detached from the political and social contexts in which they are put to work, inevitably distorts our understanding of those concepts.[28]

Protests over military responses to conflict, the politics of gender and the culture wars have generated new social practices that have re-configured the concept of conscience considerably. A good example of such invocations of conscience can be seen in the lead up to the Church of England's debate over the ordination of women in 1992 with an eye to practices that framed its use. A high ecclesiology, stressing the unbroken apostolic succession of priests and the obedience due to bishops, was a cornerstone of the self-understanding of the traditionalist wing of the church, that is, until the mind of the church no longer reflected traditionalist views.

Contrary to what many assume, the debate about the ordination of women had been going on in the Church of England since the 1860s, sparked by efforts to revive the order of deaconesses.[29] Proposals to supervise, regulate and support the ministry of sisterhoods and deaconess institutes were debated for decades, and clarity was sought to ensure that the order conferred on deaconesses would not be understood as analogous to that conferred on deacons at ordination. In 1924 the upper house of both the Convocation of Canterbury and the Convocation of York agreed on the service for ordaining deacons; however, the

[27] This was a development Hegel sought to trace in his account of the development of conscience. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
[28] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, "Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Social Practice: What Holds Them Apart?" in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 109-10.
[29] The first deaconess, Elizabeth Catherine Ferard, received a Licence from the Bishop of London in 1862. For a detailed analysis of the historical documentation of the debates, see Jacqueline Field-Bibb, *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 69.

Lambeth Conference of 1930 re-affirmed that the order of deaconess was "for women the one and only Order of the ministry."[30] When a group of clerical and lay members of the church wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury stating that they could not see any objection in principle to the ordination of women to the priesthood, a commission was set up to "examine any theological or other relevant principles which have governed or ought to govern the Church in the development of the Ministry of Women."[31] The Report it produced stated that "the Commission as a whole would not give their positive assent to the view that a woman is inherently incapable of receiving the grace of Order, and consequently of admission to any of the three Orders."[32] While finding no sufficient theological ground for the exclusion of women the Commission determined that the time was not right based on "the practical difficulties which would ensue from such an innovation, and the breach which would be caused with the traditions of Christendom in past ages, and the present maintenance of that tradition by other Christian Communions which have retained the three historic Orders of the ministry."[33]

Dissatisfaction with that Report's conclusion grew over the years. As the ordination of women became a practical legislative possibility, organized opposition to the ordination of women grew as well. That opposition was spearheaded by Reform, a pressure group of evangelical traditionalists, and "Cost of Conscience," a group of Anglo-catholic traditionalists now known as Forward in Faith, who worked to ensure that the general mind of the church remained resistant to women's ordination. When in the 1980s it became conceivable that the church might change its mind on the matter, traditionalists ceased defending canonical obedience and the authority of the church.

In 1987 a standing committee of Synod was asked to draft legislation for traditionalists. The report they presented, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: The Scope of the Legislation*, did not outline a one-clause measure for conscience but instead offered a raft of special measures. Those measures offered special provisions that would exclude the ordination of women priests to the episcopate, permit bishops to refuse to ordain and license candidates

[30] Ibid., 78.
[31] Archbishops' Commission on the Ministry of Women, *The Ministry of Women: Report of the Archbishops' Commission* (London: Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly, 1935), 1.
[32] Ibid., 29.
[33] Ibid. For a summary of the cases put forward in support and in opposition to the ordination of women to the priesthood, see Field-Bibb, *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis*, 89-95.

solely on the basis of gender and provide alternative oversight for traditionalists who disagreed with their bishops through the creation of non-geographical dioceses.[34] It was not until 1992 that a measure to permit the ordination of women in the Church of England came to a vote at General Synod and passed. The Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod, which was passed shortly thereafter, created two so-called "integrities" in the Church of England, with the special provisions for opponents of women priests who had not accepted that general mind of the Church had changed.

A more recent concept that can help us think about what was going on with the traditionalist's appeal to conscience is cultural appropriation.[35] Cultural appropriation involves the unacknowledged adoption of the customs, practices, ideas or status of one people or society by members of another more dominant people or society. In this case traditionalists in the Church of England appropriated cultural understandings of minority rights for themselves. So when "the general mind" of the Church changed in 1992 and resolved to include those who had been, up until then, excluded from ordination, traditionalists no longer held the dominant, majority position for the first time in history and recast themselves as the oppressed minority to make their case for special provisions on the grounds of conscience.

Traditionalists successfully argued that they would only be able to stay within the Church of England if they were assured women priests could not be ordained bishops, guaranteed that parishes could still bar women from exercising ordained ministry there and given alternative oversight from bishops who would not be involved in the ordination of women. In other words traditionalists took some women's experience of being excluded from ordained ministry and argued that the ordination of women would have the result of excluding them [the patriarchy] from exercising their ordained ministry within the Church of England, unless these provisions were put in place.[36] On the grounds of conscience they

[34] Field-Bibb, *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis*, 168-9.
[35] Cultural appropriation is controversial social practice that has only begun to receive explicit theorization in recent years. Richard A. Rogers, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006).
[36] Despite the enormous ground conceded to traditionalists in *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: The Scope of the Legislation*, the Revd D.N. Gibbs insisted that it "looks as if it will be taken away from men who have committed their lives to the Lord, and who have been accepted by the Church for priesthood." Field-Bibb, *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis*, 170.

argued that it would violate their integrity to have to recognize the ministry of those they had historically denied.

Traditionalists secured these exceptions and a special position within the Church of England by casting themselves as the oppressed minority, once there were legislative possibilities for ordaining women. By arguing that traditionalists now deserved the status and protection that might be afforded to a minority group–understood up to that point as a group that historically had been denied privilege, power, dignity or access–and that the conscience of a traditionalist would be violated without the protection afforded by special measures, they changed the meaning of minority rights so that it could be appropriated much more widely.[37] Traditionalists showed it could be appropriated by any group that felt it was being denied privilege, power, dignity or access in order to win concessions on the grounds of conscience.

Traditionalists were asserting, in effect, that claims of conscience function in a new way for them. A claim of conscience had been understood as a first-person claim. In other words, it is a claim about what I believe I can or cannot do in a particular set of circumstances without violating my integrity or sense of right and wrong. But the claims traditionalists were making–and continue to make–purportedly on the basis of conscience are claims about what other people can or cannot do lest their actions violate traditionalists' integrity and sense of right and wrong. The assertion of traditionalists is that the voice of conscience they hear dictates to them how other people must act. This is conscience in the third person, and it represents a clean break from traditional conceptions about how claims of conscience function.

There has been an interesting development in the United States with important parallels, concerning the lobbying efforts of Roman Catholic bishops to restrict access to contraceptives. During the Obama administration, Roman Catholic bishops demanded complete exemption to the contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act, so that employer health plans would not be required to offer preventative reproductive health coverage. Roman Catholic bishops fought for exemption on the ground of freedom of

[37] I am grateful to Rachel S. Neaum for the discussion we had about this. "Rachel S. Neaum to Women and the Church October 8, 2017, https://womenandthechurch.org/news/response-use-minority-sir-philip-mawers-review/.

conscience, with the aim of restricting access to Catholic and non-Catholic women alike, whether or not they were morally opposed to the use of contraception.[38] Moreover, they demanded that exemptions from the law would apply not only to religious employers such as Catholic parishes and dioceses, but to also to all Catholic non-profits (including the church's schools, universities, hospitals and social service organizations) and for-profits (such as Hobby Lobby, a chain store selling arts and crafts supplies run by evangelical Christians), and to both their Catholic and non-Catholic employees. The assertion of the Catholic bishops and their evangelical counterparts was that it would be a violation of their freedom of conscience for others to obtain access to reproductive health care coverage; the only way to uphold their freedom of conscience was for the moral law, as they interpreted it, to be made the civil law for everyone else.

There is not space here to adequately explore the path this has taken through the courts or the parallels between their arguments and those made by traditionalists in the Church of England, but attentiveness to practices of cultural appropriation can shine a light on the dynamics of power involved when claims of conscience of these sorts are made. For this reason, historical studies that aim to trace the changes that the concept of conscience has undergone need to explore how the social practices which frame those terms are undergoing change as well.

This overview of the twists and turns that conscience has taken over its tortuous history has highlighted a few of the major semantic, conceptual and social changes that have configured conscience. Attentiveness to these changes in the context of the concept of conscience–changes to the terminology, changes in the conceptual field but also the changes to social practices–can help makes sense of the various uses to which conscience has been put at different points.

Conscience can mean anything

Attempts to get a handle on what conscience has and has not meant over time and attempts to re-work conscience so that it is less ambiguous are motivated by concern that a claim of conscience could mean anything. At its most basic, conscience is an experience of normativity as such, which gives rise to a sense of obligation in us. While conscience

[38] Leslie C. Griffin, "The Catholic Bishops vs. The Contraceptive Mandate," *Religions* 6 (2015).

designates an experience of normativity, it says nothing about the nature or content of the claim the being made on us. To put it another way, the concept of conscience is formal. Because it is formal, or empty, it can have any content. So, in theory, conscience could tell me anything, and, in practice, it could be used to justify anything. My conscience might tell me that I must always tell the truth, or it could tell that I must lie in this instance. This means that conscience can be harnessed for any purpose, even a pernicious one.

The real problem of conscience that none of those approaches I have outlined can adequately contend with is that the formalism of conscience has the potential to undermine the morality of conscience. To put it another way, claims of conscience refer to a particular experience of normativity which obligates us, but claims of conscience do not contain, in and of themselves, anything that could confirm the experience is in fact moral. Conscience simply says, "I must" or "I cannot." It does not specify why.

While there is nothing in conscience to ensure it is reserved exclusively for good purposes, conscience can be given normative content in other ways. I have tried to show that the content of conscience is not provided in full by its linguistic context or even by its conceptual context, but also requires some account of its social and political function. What I want to propose at this stage is that efforts to reduce the ambiguity of conscience, and to reserve the idea of it only for good purposes, however those are conceived, represent a failure to fully appreciate its formalism. Later chapters will go on explore to what extent the normative content of conscience can be supplied by individual preferences and whether it is better supplied by traditions, practices, and the institutions of social and political life. But first, it is instructive to see what can happen when the concept of conscience is "done over."

"Doing conscience over" until conscience is doing it all

> There is evidence that persons and self-consciousness exist in all cultures, that innate emotional programs are everywhere the same. These aspects of human nature predispose the human being to moral decision making always and everywhere. …Evidence from many sources reveals that questions of conscience appear in all places and times that have been recorded; an inner sense of right and wrong comes with the birth of the self and self-consciousness.[39]

[39] Sidney C. Callahan, *In Good Conscience: Reason and Emotion in Moral Decision Making* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 177.

Scholars who are trying to develop a new understanding of conscience by "doing conscience over" have taken on board Lehmann's warning that conscience is a "concept in search of a context." Many have tried to establish the co-ordinates of conscience's context by correlating conscience to other concepts that may clarify its proper meaning, function and significance. This produces studies that aim to reduce the ambiguity of conscience by drawing out the connections between conscience and responsibility,[40] conscience and integrity,[41] conscience and obedience,[42] conscience and transcendence,[43] conscience and self-transcendence,[44] conscience and other virtues,[45] conscience and prayer[46]–to take the titles of a few such projects.

What these projects have in common is that they seek to qualify the acting subject and the field of action in order to build up a picture of the full context in which conscience can be understood. While connecting conscience to less ambiguous concepts such as responsibility, integrity or obedience, can go some way towards specifying how conscience could be understood in a secular context, and connecting conscience to concepts such as transcendence and prayer might go some way in specifying how conscience should be understood in theological context, neither go far enough. Conscience cannot be adequately explained in light of another, related concept.

The underlying problem is that in the absence of an adequate account of the good or of human nature all of these concepts retain some ambiguity no matter how they are configured together. Without an adequate account of the good or of human nature, the concept of conscience tends to aggregate more meanings and functions to itself. As a consequence, conscience gets tasked with supplying more of the conceptual basis for moral action. When the concept of conscience is put to work shoring up our account of responsible moral action, it is more likely to be viewed as a universal. Having served various roles in Platonic, Stoic and Christian thought, conscience lends itself to being abstracted; therefore,

---

[40] Eric Mount, *Conscience and Responsibility* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969).
[41] Ian Shapiro and Robert Adams, *Integrity and Conscience: Nomos Xl* (New York: NYU Press, 1998).
[42] William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience* (Wipf & Stock I, 2004).
[43] Donald E. Miller, *The Wing-Footed Wanderer: Conscience and Transcendence* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977).
[44] Walter E. Conn, *Conscience: Development and Self-Transcendence* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1981).
[45] Douglas C. Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).
[46] Dennis J. Billy and James Keating, *Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).

efforts to do conscience over that fail to situate it firmly within a particular moral frame are prone to produce situations where conscience is lifted out of context.

This is most clearly evident once the concept of conscience is treated as providing the core of conscious subjectivity. It is then held as key to universal moral experience. The search for a non-context dependent moral imperative has led many to pick up the concept of conscience in this way. Sidney Callahan, for example, holds that conscience really only has one meaning–something like the personal capacity to judge for ourselves what is right and what is wrong–and one function–in that the capacity to distinguish good and evil for ourselves is meant to offer principled resistance in the form of the courageous lone individual, who is willing to stand up to those in power and authority, because they believe this is right. While that view of conscience will be dismissed by many as the kind of gross oversimplification that comes from being held in thrall to a certain narrative of modernity, Callahan is not alone in wanting to assert that there is consensus among all people, religious and secular, that the self-conscious person exists and that all moral decisions can be oriented to doing good and avoiding evil.[47]

The view of conscience as a moral phenomenon that occurs "in all places and times" has contributed to the development of naturalistic and subjective idealistic accounts of conscience. The supposition that everyone possesses a conscience, and that conscience gives every human being dignity and rights, has also inspired the hope that conscience can supply the foundation of ethics by serving as the basis for common moral experience. Talking about conscience permits discussion about the dignity of the moral subject without having to come to any prior agreement about the nature of God or the structures of cosmos and society ordained by God. In those discussions, the concept of conscience is typically aligned with universal moral reasoning, so that conscience is seen to be consistent with Kantian moral theory and capable of extending it.[48] Once conscience supplies the core of conscience subjectivity and provides universal moral experience, it can be enlisted to serve in any context. Conscience may even be given an existence above cultural, historical and linguistic contexts.

---

[47] Callahan, *In Good Conscience: Reason and Emotion in Moral Decision Making*, 32. Others who share the view that conscience supplies the basis for a universal anthropology include: John C. Staten, *Conscience and the Reality of God* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988); Conn, *Conscience: Development and Self-Transcendence*.
[48] D'Arcy, *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom*; Thomas E. Hill, "Four Conceptions of Conscience," in *Integrity and Conscience*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Robert Adams (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

To see how conscience could attain this kind of existence, it can be instructive to consider how conscience entered into the language of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is easily the most interesting and under-studied twist in the linguistic history of conscience. The preamble to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) explains that "disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind." The Declaration then asserts that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience." (Article 1.) It then attempts to secure freedom of conscience as an enforceable right, stating that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion." (Article 18.)

Reflecting on the making of the Universal Declaration and the discursive struggle over crafting universal human rights, Lydia Liu explains that there were many debates on conscience. Liu draws attention to the figure of P. C. Chang, a Chinese ambassador who rose to prominence in the UN and became one of the principal architects of the UDHR in 1946–48. Chang was the Vice-Chair of the Human Rights Commission, which was tasked with the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Chang was responsible for freeing the idea of human rights from associations with Western Christian notions of natural rights and Enlightenment notions of autonomous individuality so that it might universalized. He did so by revising the meaning of *human* in human rights.

Chang argued that it was not sufficient to say that humans were simply endowed with reason and that something else ought to be included. He suggested that Article One include another concept, a second essential human attribute. Liu relays how Chang tried to prevail on the Committee to adopt a Confucian concept: *ren*.[49] The Chinese character pronounced *ren* is a literal translation of a concept from Confucian moral philosophy which Chang glossed as "two-men-mindedness." Liu suggests the character in Mandarin pronounced *ren* is better translated as "plural human," something akin to consciousness of one's responsibilities to other people; however, there was no equivalent in either English or French, the working languages of the UN, that would help Chang's colleagues understand what he was going after. In the end the members of the drafting committee accepted Chang's proposal to add a second essential attribute but decided that concept of conscience

[49] Lydia H. Liu, "Shadows of Universalism: The Untold Story of Human Rights around 1948," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (2014): 411-13.

would stand in for *ren*. Thus Article 1 read that humans are "endowed with reason and conscience."

When the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, it existed in multiple languages and was soon translated into 375 different languages. Each translation had the effect of exporting the concept of conscience, with its own particular genealogical tradition, into a new linguistic and philosophical context. However, the process of translation revealed the concept of conscience to be less universal than assumed, since few non-European languages had equivalent terms to the word conscience. Multilingual reiterations of the UDHR were tasked with re-working the concept of conscience linguistically so that it could take a place within other intellectual traditions.

Adding a further twist to the story of conscience's universalization, Liu observed that in the Chinese version of the UDHR conscience was not translated as *ren*.[50] Instead the word *liangxin* was substituted. *Liangxin* is related to *ren* in Confucian moral philosophy and describes a moral disposition of being open to the humanity of others. Liu asserts that the conflation of *liangxin* and conscience "was an attempt to forge what she calls a 'master sign,' powerfully semiotic and freed from its specifically Christian associations."[51] So after conscience was pried from its original conceptual and political contexts to act as a universal, standing in the place of *ren* to articulate what was essentially human, it was inserted back into new intellectual traditions via translation, before being re-configured by *liangxin* that it might exist above culture and outside of time. As a master sign conscience is free to assume any context, language or tradition.

So far we have seen how efforts to "do conscience over" by situating it in a context, namely a context that attempts to fix the co-ordinates of conscience by configuring it to another notion, freights conscience with the burden of conveying what it might mean to act with responsibility, integrity, obedience, responsibility and authority (returning again to the titles of those recent efforts to do conscience over). Conscience, so configured, must maintain our deepest convictions, signal our self-awareness and sense of individuality, secure our dignity and shore up what it means to be a human being. The literature on conscience certainly

[50] It is not known whether Chang was involved in that particular translation. Ibid., 413.
[51] Strohm, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction*, 85.

suggests that doing this concept over results in a situation where conscience must now do it all.

Conclusion

This chapter showed what happens when scholars delve into the history of conscience in an effort to manage the problem of the conscience. It began by assessing efforts to situate conscience in its semantic context, showing why they fail to tell the whole story. It also evaluated other approaches that extend beyond the semantics of conscience but do not extend far enough. I argued that these approaches fail to provide sufficient resources to adequately analyze the ambiguities that have posed problems for conscience over the course of its history. Moreover, they prevent us recognizing the inherent problem of conscience: the fact that its formalism undermines its purported normativity. Lastly, I pointed to efforts to rework conscience that did not address this problem head on. Those efforts showed that when we fail to appreciate that conscience can mean anything, in the absence of a rich account of its particular social, political, metaphysical and linguistic context, conscience can end up doing everything.

II

"Conscience made me do it": Conscience and moral articulacy

Introduction

In the last chapter, I asserted that the concept of conscience is formal and argued that because of its formalism, conscience could, in theory, tell me anything and could, in practice, be used to justify anything. This has created considerable skepticism about conscience–whether that be about its existence, its normativity, its universality, its objectivity, its infallibility or its capacity to liberate. It has also created genuine frustration for theorists trying to manage the problem of conscience, a frustration encapsulated in the dilemma of whether and how to "do the concept over."[52]

In everyday speech talk of conscience can be particularly hard to negotiate. Especially when we say, "Conscience made me do it", or "I must do X because my conscience tells me," and leave it at that, as if no other explanation is required. These sorts of claims present conscience as if they were sufficient warrant to be able to do what we please without interference. In fact, such claims beg for elaboration. Nevertheless, it is often a struggle to spell out our reasoning. This chapter examines why that is the case.

It begins by looking at phenomenological aspects of conscience that lend credence to the view that we may invoke conscience as a free-standing assertion about what is morally right for us. I argue that these aspects of conscience deflect attention from the work of recognizing what motivates our moral judgments and from the responsibility we have to articulate those motivations so that others can engage with them.

---

[52] These frustrations can be heard in Bernard Wand's rehearsal of the meanings conscience has borne: "It has been said of conscience that it is fallible (Broad), that it is infallible (Butler); that its ultimate basis is emotional (Mill), that its ultimate source is rational (Rashdall); that it is the voice of God (Hartmann), or the voice of custom (Paulsen); that it is merely advisory (Nowell-Smith), that it is a command internally imposed (Mayo); that it is conscious (Butler), that it is unconscious (Freud); that it is a faculty (Butler), that it is not (any contemporary moral philosopher); that it is the disposition to have certain beliefs, emotions, and conations which, when operative, issue in conscientious actions (Broad), and that it is conscientious action (Ryle)." Bernard Wand, "The Content and Function of Conscience," *The Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 24 (1961): 771.

From there this chapter turns to consider the work of Charles Taylor. Taylor has written extensively about the ways we tend to think, reason, argue and question ourselves about morality. He is particularly interested in why we find it difficult to intuit the ideals that have a hold on us and to talk about them. Taylor attributes this moral inarticulacy to certain features of modern moral theories and to the development of self-defining subjectivity. Going over Taylor's work on moral frameworks and agency allows me to situate the problem of conscience within the unresolved debates of modernity and to frame modern conscience as an exemplary instance of self-defining subjectivity. Doing that will help us come to grips with the philosophical roots of our modern conceptions of conscience. It will also help us understand the role conscience now plays in easing the tension between universal ethical imperatives and the individual's own particular experience of the world.

Another one of Taylor's agendas is to show that moral articulation is qualitatively different from what it was for our pre-modern predecessors, because we face a fundamentally different existential predicament as a result of secularization. For Taylor, a critical examination of secularism requires that we take a closer look at the structural realities that make up secularism (such as the protection of freedom of conscience) and at the moral aims that motivate secularism (universal benevolence for instance). Exploring his work on secularization's structural realities and moral sources will allow me to show the pressures on modern conscience in new light: not just as a political necessity for managing our conflicts but also as an experiential imperative in a secular age. It will also show where to begin in formulating a new approach to conscience, which will be the focus of chapter VI.

Invoking conscience to deflect attention from our inarticulacy

> Even though we feel strongly about abortion, divorce, dishonesty, and so on, we are not sure why we feel as we do. And the less sure we are of the reasons for our beliefs, the more dogmatically we hold to them as our only still point in a morally chaotic world. Ironically, our dogmatism only masks our more profound doubt, for although we hold certain moral convictions adamantly, we secretly suspect that we believe what we do because we have been conditioned. We hold certain beliefs as if they are unconditioned yet are impressed with the knowledge that all beliefs are the result of the environment, and thus at least potentially arbitrary. That very acknowledgement seems then to reduce all moral disagreements to subjective opinions about which there can be no argument. This lurking suspicion that we

> really have no firm grounds for our beliefs makes us all the more unwilling to expose what we think to critical scrutiny.[53]

The lurking suspicion that we really have no firm grounds for our beliefs plays into the ways claims of conscience are made. This is most evident when conscience is invoked in ways that suggest conscience itself has informed our judgment, rather than moral reasons, which we would need to spell out. It is also evident when we insist that our conscience must obeyed because of its absolute authority or because that is required based on my identity as a certain kind of person. Neither way of framing a decision of conscience supplies an explanation of how we reached that decision of conscience. Nevertheless, they resonant with several phenomenological aspects of conscience that are worth unpacking.

When struggling to articulate our reasons for judging a particular action to be morally right (or wrong) according to our conscience, we sometimes speak as if it were conscience itself that informed our judgment, as if conscience itself were the reason. This is understandable and gets at two phenomenological aspects of conscience. The first aspect is that decisions of conscience are often experienced as the arrival of a conclusion rather than the movement of thought. The second aspect is that decisions of conscience are sometimes experienced as an uncanny voice coming from a source outside or beyond oneself. This is reflected in the tendency to describe conscience as a sort of latent internal moral repository that issues directives when activated. It is also reflected in the tendency to treat conscience as an agent that mandates the right course of moral action such as an oracle, a Socratic daemon or a Jiminy Cricket.

These two phenomenological aspects of conscience can lend credence to the intuition that conscience is actual rather than formal. We say: "conscience made me do it," as if conscience itself led us to judge a particular act to be morally right (or wrong). Treating the experience of conscience as a reason for our judgments obscures the fact that our decisions of conscience are responses to moral convictions. When following conscience is put forward as the motivation for our decision, our decision becomes inscrutable. For this reason, modern conscience is likened to a black box in which no one can see into or describe the contents of.[54]

---

[53] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 3.
[54] Vischer, *Conscience and the Common Good: Reclaiming the Space between Person and State*, 20.

Those who maintain that it is conscience itself that informed their judgment sometimes take another tack when pressed. Rather than explain the moral convictions that led them to make that judgment, they insist that conscience itself directed them and that obedience to it motivated them. So, they treat the need to follow conscience, its absolute authority, as if that itself were a sufficient reason. This gets at another phenomenological aspect of conscience, which is that conscience is bound up with the experience of moral obligation. Nevertheless, framing a decision of conscience simply in terms of the obligation to follow conscience does not supply an explanation of how we reached that decision. It merely asserts the binding nature of conscience. These kinds of claims of conscience close down conversation by hiding behind the authority of conscience and some sense of obedience to that authority.

Another way to deflect attention from the difficulties we experience in trying to articulate what we mean when we make a claim of conscience is to explain that I must do what my conscience tells me because, if I do not, my sense of personal integrity would be violated. While decisions of conscience, as a decision about what I must or must not do, are inherently self-reflective, they are not merely self-reflective. Decisions of conscience are judgments about the meaning and value of the action I believe I am obligated to take made in light of the norms that obligate me; they are not simply judgments about the demands of own integrity and identity. When I cannot voice the meaning and value of the actions in terms of norms and fall back on the claim to be following my identity or what is required to maintain my integrity, I am treating my individuality as a self-sufficient reason for my decision of conscience. Explaining our decisions in this way portrays modern conscience's claims as endlessly self-referential.

We may wish for our claims of conscience to be received by others as demands that must be accommodated so as not to violate our conscience, because we do not want to examine our own reasons and motivations. Perhaps we harbor a suspicion that our reasons in some way exceed reason and cannot be put into words. Alternatively, we may know what reasons motivate us but would rather those reason not come up for debate. So, we shield them from scrutiny by framing our decision as a matter of obedience to conscience, in the hope that our claim will be received as a non-negotiable demand. Or we talk about the certainty we feel about our decision in the hope that we will be justified based on the strength of our conviction and not on the basis of those reasons. In all of these instances, claims of

conscience are articulated as a warrant for our actions rather than offered alongside the reasons that might provide some justification for our actions.

Describing a moral decision simply as a decision of conscience, without explaining the basis of my conviction or the reasons that led to my judgment, is insufficient. If claims of conscience are going to be accessible to others, those claims need to be framed not as free-standing assertions about what is morally right but as judgments that we only could have made against a particular normative background. That does not mean that we must strip our desires, intuitions, emotions and basic cares and personal commitments out of the equation when describing decisions of conscience. The reasons given need not be limited to those goods that can be reasoned and debated nor do they need to have a basis solely in general moral duties. Conscience is more than those sorts of reason. It also concerns what those reasons mean to me or it would be unclear what calling such a decision "conscience" adds.[55]

While my reasons do not have to be abstracted from my particular motives and interests, there is a responsibility to articulate those reasons in such a way that others can recognize them and evaluate them. Some accountability is necessary because claims of conscience are a source of conflict. They are a source of conflict for the subject, who is thrown into a crisis about what to do when his actions seem to be governed by conflicting norms or norms that cannot be fully justified, and also for those who have to judge to what extent this claim of conscience should override other considerations and whether it can be accommodated. So, there is a burden on the person who claims to be following conscience to supply some content to that claim in order for others to see that that is in fact what that person is doing, as the meaning of the claim cannot be taken as given.

The conflicts and controversy surrounding decisions of conscience should force those implicit reasons to the fore, even if our preference is to leave the moral sources behind our claims unspoken and to use the authority or individuality of conscience as a smokescreen for our decision-making process. Unless we articulate the moral claims, which conscience discerns and to which it responds, we will not be able to make sense of some of our moral responses or be able to explain them to others.

[55] Vischer makes this point: Ibid., 68, 91.

The ethics of inarticulacy

Charles Taylor has paid close attention to the signs of moral inarticulacy and can help make sense of what is happening when we appeal to conscience. He attributes moral inarticulacy to certain features of modern moral theories and to the development of self-defining subjectivity. Taylor describes moral articulation as the ability to intuit the ideals that have a hold on us and talk about them. He understands those ideals to be visions of the good. These visions of the good are sources of identity in that the ability to live according to these ideals shapes our moral self-worth. Taylor explains that "performance to these standards has become part of what we understand as a decent, civilized human life. We live up to them to the extent that we do because we would be somewhat ashamed of ourselves if we didn't. They have become part of our self-image, our sense of our own worth."[56] For that reason these moral ideals or visions of the good comprise a person's normative moral framework.

Moral frameworks

A normative framework provides the frame or horizon within which I can get my bearing and try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable or what ought to be done. Frameworks incorporate a set of qualitative distinctions about what is important to me and what is not, based on higher ends that make an absolute claim (against merely relative ones). These qualitative distinctions are perceptions of the good, where "good" designates anything considered, valuable, worthy or admirable. A good could be "some action, or motive, or style of life, which is seen as qualitatively superior."[57]

The idea of the Good or the "constitutive good" is what makes particular actions, motives or aspirations good. Taylor terms these constitutive goods "moral sources," because of the way they empower us to do and be good.[58] A moral source has the capacity to shape the will; it provides the motivation to live up to the demands we place on ourselves and the ideals to which we aspire.[59] So, for instance, the ideals of freedom, altruism, and universalism are among the central moral sources of modern culture; they are the

[56] Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, ed. James L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18.
[57] *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 92.
[58] Ibid., 92-3.
[59] Ibid., 693.

"hypergoods" which are distinctive to it. These hyper goods are higher order goods with unique importance that provide the standpoint by which other, ordinary goods are judged.[60] They shape our view of the value of all other goods and provide the definition of what is "moral" in our culture.

With a normative framework, qualitative distinctions about the good represent the standards by which we determine what is desirable, admirable, pure and by which we judge our desires, inclinations and decisions.[61] Qualitative distinctions give the reasons for our moral and ethical beliefs, where reasons are understood to be justifications based on our perceptions or intuitions of the good.[62] In other words, qualitative distinctions help us answer questions about how we should live. We come to know our beliefs by taking our moral intuitions seriously and by trying to put them into words that would justify them to others. Taylor explains that "we should treat our deepest moral instincts, our ineradicable sense that human life is to be respected, as our mode of access to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted."[63]

Our moral intuitions come into view and attain the power to motivate us, as we begin to articulate them; however, there is not one way only to put these intuitions into words. As other commentators have noted, Taylor's treatment of moral articulacy assumes a plurality of accounts: "all of which are better or worse at correctly articulating a particular vision of the good, but it also assumes that even the worse account can say something, however inchoately, about the sources that animate it."[64] The articulation that more correctly expresses, illuminates, formulates, or makes sense of an intuited moral sources should be talked about as the best account. That account is the best not only because it identifies the good most correctly and clearly but also because it allows us to say why it moves us.

As moral articulacy means having the capacity to be explicit about our moral sources, moral inarticulacy is worrying in that it can cause us to lose contact with the good however it is conceived.[65] Without moral articulation, we cannot state the moral point of our actions or

---

[60] Ibid., 63.
[61] Ibid., 19, 20.
[62] Ibid., 54.
[63] Ibid., 8.
[64] Carlos D. Colorado, "Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 81.
[65] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 97.

make clear what is important or valuable or commands our allegiance. The inability to disclose the presuppositions that inform our judgments on any particular subject of moral controversy has been identified as one the predicaments that characterizes modern, post-Enlightenment, moral cultures.[66] Taylor's agenda is to show that the process of articulation is qualitatively different for moderns in their quest for meaning than it was for our pre-modern predecessors, because we face a fundamentally different existential predicament.

How modern moral theories foster inarticulacy

Taylor attributes contemporary moral inarticulacy to several features of modern moral theories found in almost all contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy. These new features of moral thought give rise to reductive accounts, which inhibit the discussions we should be having about the nature and sources of the values which underlie our moral ideals. In broad brush strokes, Taylor's argument is that whether by side-lining or actually suppressing moral sources, modern moral theories leave us inarticulate when it comes to describing the contours of the good life. Taylor identifies three features of modern moral theories that contribute to inarticulacy.

First, modern moral theories inhibit moral articulacy by focusing on determining the principles of action and invoke various procedures to ascertain the right action.[67] They share a procedural conception of reason, in which good thinking involves maximizing calculation or universalization, rather than a substantive one. Taylor explains, "I call a notion of reason substantive where we judge the rationality of agents or their thoughts and feelings in substantive terms. This means that the criterion for rationality is that one gets it right. ...By contrast, a procedural notion of reason breaks this connection. The rationality of an agent or his thought is judged by how he thinks, not in the first instance by whether the outcome is substantively correct. Good thinking is defined procedurally."[68] Taylor holds that the way Kantians and utilitarians invoke procedures pushes aside questions about the substantively correct ends, which would define a good life, and precludes them from saying anything coherent about the goods we value or their claim on us.

---

[66] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, "The Recovery of Moral Agency?," in *The Best Christian Writing 2000*, ed. John Wilson (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000).
[67] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87.
[68] Ibid., 85-6.

Second, modern moral philosophers inhibit moral articulacy by basing their theories on a limited set of "basis reasons" rather than on qualitative distinctions. On Taylor's account, utilitarians and Kantians organize everything around one basic reason, in the first instance on the principle of maximizing utility and in the second instance on the categorical imperative.[69] Articulating a basic reason to explain the point of your rules is not the same as articulating qualitative distinctions. Taylor asserts that "it is one thing to say that I ought to refrain from manipulating your emotions or threatening you, because that is what respecting your rights as a human being requires. It is quite another to set out just what makes human beings worthy of commanding our respect, and to describe the higher mode of life and feeling which is involved in recognizing this."[70] Taylor holds that the way modern moral theorists suppress the existence of qualitative distinctions limits the range of moral questions we can answer (why, for instance, humans are worthy of respect and concern, or what makes a life worth living) and prevents us from being explicit about the moral sources that underlie our beliefs.[71] Modern theorists do not just suppress qualitative distinctions, some deny their reality altogether or cast them as projections.[72] Here Taylor has in mind "all those who are influenced by a naturalist-inspired metaphysical picture, say, of humans as objects of science, or as part of a disenchanted universe, to adopt a basically non-realist position about the strongly valued goods."[73]

---

[69] Ibid., 76.
[70] Ibid., 77.
[71] Will Kymlicka counters that while it is true that naturalism suppresses qualitative distinctions, it is not true of utilitarianism, as it affirms that benevolence has the status of a higher good even if utilitarians have not given much attention to the question of why people are worthy of equal concern. (167, 171). Kymlicka holds that while modern moral theorists do respond to qualitative distinctions differently it is not because they reject them but because they do not see their task to articulate the good. On his view, "their belief is simply that the ways of life which are worthy of our allegiance are suitably protected by principles of right which provide people with the resources, rights, and social conditions under which they can make their informed judgments about the good on an on-going basis." (169) So, for Kymlicka, the task of moral philosophers is not to evaluate the good or to draw distinctions to clarify what it is good to be–a task better left to artists, ministers, theologians and psychologists–but to clarify our moral obligations so as "to impress on people the importance of respecting other people's good." (170). The real disagreement between Taylor and Kymlicka concerns whether we do or do not need strong moral sources that can motivate people to live up to the standards of universal justice, especially in instances where upholding the legitimate claims of others' conflicts with ordinary goods. For instance, impartial morality will at times require us to voluntarily relinquish our unjust advantages, which may include the goods of community friendship and traditional identity, and that we sacrifice our attachment to those ordinary goods in order to respect other people's good. Kymlicka thinks we do not need strong moral sources to motivate voluntary compliance, for "in an unjust world, morality may be as much about what individuals can rightly take by force as it is about what individuals can voluntarily sacrifice." (178) Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991).
[72] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 80.
[73] Ibid., 58-9.

Finally, modern moral theories inhibit moral articulacy by giving priority to the right over the good. Earlier moral theories held that "the reverse is the case, that in a sense, the good is always primary to the right. Not in the sense that it offers a more basic reason in the sense of our earlier discussion, but in that the good is what, in its articulation, gives the point of the rules which define the right."[74] Taylor believes it is a problem that modern moral philosophers segregate all but the most abstract considerations of the good, and he argues that they have abandoned their task in focusing on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be.

Having expunged questions about substantively correct ends, side-lined qualitative distinctions and shifted the focus to what is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, modern moral theories are left with "no way of capturing the background understanding surrounding any conviction that we ought to act in this or that way–the understanding of the strong good involved."[75] Taylor holds that as long as the moral sources that motivate us are treated as irrelevant to the discussion, we will struggle to make our moral decision intelligible to ourselves and to others. We can no longer say what is good or valuable about the moral code we cleave to or the moral consideration we want to give priority to, or why our moral considerations ought to be given higher priority in deliberation. There is very little we say about our moral decisions. They are simply "choices."

What underpins modern moral standards

Inarticulacy presents a further problem, because while we feel bound to certain moral standards in modern culture there is no consensus about what would motivate us to live up to them. The liberal virtues are the standards (or hypergoods) most characteristic of life in the modern moral order, where we "feel particularly strongly the demand for universal justice and beneficence, and are particularly sensitive to the claims of equality, feel the demands to freedom and self-rule as axiomatically justified, and put a very high priority on the avoidance of death and suffering."[76] The difficulty we face is that there are profound rifts about what actually underpins these standards. If pressed some might give a theological response when questioned about their moral standards, saying that humans are in the image

[74] Ibid., 89.
[75] Ibid., 87.
[76] Ibid., 495.

of God and speak of being motivated by the love of God. While others will speak of being motivated by a conviction about human dignity and worth, or of being energized by a feeling of indignation about oppression, injustice and suffering.[77]

To help us make sense of our responses, Taylor sketches three sets of anthropological views in *Sources of the Self*. These are views that modern people draw upon in the attempt to articulate their views about what motivates their aspirations to meet their moral standards. These sets of views act as sources of constitutive goods and sources with which to understand the self. The first is a theistic view, which provides a theological grounding for moral motivations, moral standards and the sense of self.[78] The latter two categories are quintessentially modern for breaking with older views which defined subjectivity in relation to an ideal order beyond and building upon the idea of defining subjectivity in relation to itself. Taylor terms this new subjectivity "self-defining."

From it we can trace the second category of moral sources, the naturalistic view, which holds that our nature and our moral standards are best understood in scientific, instrumentalist, atomistic terms without any recourse to final causes. Self-definition, on this view, "is bound up with a sense of control over the world–at first intellectual then technological."[79] Taylor explains that full self-definition "requires that we free ourselves from the projections of meanings onto things, that we be able to draw back from the world, and concentration purely on our own processes of observation and thought about things. The old model now looks like a dream of self-dispersal; self-presence is now to be aware of what we are and what we are doing in abstraction from the world we observe and judge."[80]

The third category, or expressivist view, is thought of as the alternative modern outlook. This expressivism fueled a moral vision that was widespread among Romantic writers and also among Romanticism's successors: emotivism, projectivism and other forms of liberal-individualist empiricism. On this view, we can only know our unique nature and our own moral standards by giving verbal or artistic expression to that which exists within us. Expression has the effect of realizing our life's purpose and clarifying who we are - which we come to recognize as authentic. So "man as conscious being achieves his highest point

[77] *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 698.
[78] *Sources of the Self*, 495.
[79] *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 7.
[80] Ibid.

when he cognizes his own life as an adequate, a true expression of what he potentially is– just as an artist or writer reaches his goal in recognizing his work as a fully adequate expression of what he wanted to say."[81]

Self-defining subjectivity has a number of compelling features. Taylor believes these features play the crucial role in secularization, a thesis he expands on in *A Secular Age*. Nevertheless, the definition that Enlightenment naturalism gave to self-defining subjectivity was felt to come at too high a cost for proponents of expressivism, who viewed it not as exhilarating self-possession and self-affirmation but as inner-division and self-alienation. Where Enlightenment thinkers created separate categories that divided "soul from body, reason from feeling, reason from imagination, thought from senses, desire from calculation."[82] Romantics strove to overcome divisions which jeopardized their aspiration to wholeness. They sought a feeling of harmony with self, unity with others and communion with nature. And they sought it in their inner depths, where a new source of morality could be found and brought out through the power of expressive self-articulation.

In short, modern culture discovered two new domains to explore in seeking sources of constitutive goods and sources with which to understand the self. These sources could be found in the exaltation of our own powers and in the exaltation of nature. Enlightenment humanism and Romantic expressivism conceive of and access these domains differently, using either the power of disengaged rational control or the power of the creative imagination which gives expression to our inner nature. This generates tension, because the modern subject is defined by both the instrumental stance and the creative imagination, and the former can cause us to disengage from the latter.[83]

The moral and spiritual ramifications of these Enlightenment and Romantic developments are still being worked out and, as Taylor seeks to show, the disagreement about what underpins our moral standards is far from settled:

> The battle between these spiritual outlooks, which starts in the eighteenth century, is still going on today. This in spite of the fact that the Romantic doctrines about the current of life, or the All of nature, have just about totally disappeared. Just as

[81] Ibid., 17.
[82] Taylor, *Hegel*, 23.
[83] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 390.

> Enlightenment humanism is no longer extant in its Deist form, but survives in naturalism, so the idea of nature as a source no longer refers to a God or cosmic spirit in the world, but the demand remains very much alive that we be open to or in tune with nature in ourselves and outside. The loss of belief in a spirit in nature has itself, of course, been the occasion of crisis and doubt, but the understanding of nature as a source still survives, although what underlies it is very uncertain and problematic.[84]

Taylor identifies both the theistic and atheistic outlooks as "spiritual" with the aim of reframing what it means to be religious in the modern secular world. Taylor is interested in how people might be re-attuned to God in a secular age without simply returning to the pre-modern. One of his aims in *A Secular Age* is to challenge the central tenet of the secularization thesis, which holds that religion entered into irreversible decline with the advent of modernity and that secularity is now the only defensible option. Taylor wants to explore the religious possibilities in a secular age, because he does not think that modern moral sources are capable of satisfying our needs as moral and political selves in the modern world. Ultimately, he wants to open up a conversation about whether agape could ground an ethics of benevolence and about whether Trinitarianism could provide a foundation for a pluralist politics. Before turning to his wide-ranging treatment of secularization, I want to give some indication of what these developments mean for modern conscience. For Taylor's treatment of self-defining agency offers important insights into the pressures on modern conceptions conscience.

Conscience in the modern moral order

Self-defining agency and modern conscience

Taylor's treatment of modern moral sources is suggestive in that it allows us to view modern conscience as an exemplary instance of self-defining subjectivity. This in turn helps us come to grips with the philosophical roots of our modern conceptions of conscience. It helps us to recognize our commitment to the Romantic ideals that we now associate with following conscience (ideals such as authenticity, individualism and creative expression) and with being true to conscience.[85] Modern conscience is thus treated as part of what it means to be human and seen as representing the integrity of the human.

---

[84] Ibid., 384.
[85] Ibid., 79.

It also shows why assertions of conscience are so often marked by moral inarticulacy and an inability or unwillingness to provide some justification for our decisions. The modern moral order is characterized by an ongoing commitment to certain standards for the justification of moral judgments, formulated during the Enlightenment which hold that we should be able to justify our moral judgments by appealing to universal principles that could not reasonably be rejected by any rational agent. That commitment is combined with an awareness that different conclusions have been reached about what those principles should be–principles for maximizing utility or for following the categorical imperative–so there are no fully justified norms. Moral articulacy stems from the realization that we ought to be able to offer reasons for our decisions and that there are no reasons that will fully justify those decisions.

What is more, the Enlightenment vision admits no place for my own particular motivation reasons, which the Romantic vision elevated: the interests or projects that shape my determination that this is what I must or mustn't do in these particular circumstances in order to be true to who I am and who I am becoming. Conscience, as first-person reasoning about what I should do based on who I am and my circumstances, insists that my own particular interests be treated as morally relevant and related to the good of others. For that reason, conscience appears to ease the tension between the universal ethical imperative and the subject's own experience of the world, or as one commentator identifies as "the tension between the extremes of disengaged reason–which has made the 'universality' of our commitments thinkable–and Romantic expressivism–which affirms the significance of every individual's uncategorizable quotidian experience."[86] Modern conscience's position within the unresolved debates of modernity gives some hint as to why conscience gets saddled with carrying the unrealized hope for a universal ethic notwithstanding the persistence of the three families of moral theories.

Secularism and modern conscience

Taylor is concerned about what is needed for a world in which societies must learn to live with moral and religious diversity. He is pushing for a more critical examination of the role

[86] Justin D. Klassen, "The Affirmation of Existential Life in Charles Taylor's A Secular Age," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 16.

secularism plays in democratic societies where citizens espouse a plurality of conceptions about the world and the good–based on religious, spiritual as well as secular core beliefs–arguing that religious conceptions of the world and the good should not be placed in a class apart from the other conceptions but rather given equal respect. A critical examination of secularism requires that we take a closer look at both the moral aims that motivate secularism and the structural realities that make up secularism. Taylor's only sustained treatment of conscience is to be found in a slim volume titled *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, where he and Jocelyn Maclure look at the latter.

Taylor and Maclure identify important tensions and contradictions in the structural realities of secularism, which are masked by the ways social scientists tend to describe liberal political systems. One of those tensions can be seen when the place of religion in the public sphere is debated. Secularism, as a political mode of governance, is based on (1) respect for the moral equality of individuals, and (2) protection of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.[87] These two constitutive principles do not always sit together neatly. They can be interpreted in different ways raising a number of questions:

> Do moral equality and freedom of conscience justify, in certain cases, that accommodation measures or exemptions be granted to certain people so that they may practice their religions? Do such accommodations constitute preferential treatment incompatible with an adequate understanding of social justice? And if religious beliefs do sometimes justify practices of accommodation, what about nonreligious beliefs? How, in other words, is equal treatment of religious and nonreligious people to be assured? Must "conscious convictions," whether religious or secular, be treated like the other personal preferences, or must a special moral and legal statues be attributed to these convictions?[88]

This conflict can be seen in the attempt to reconcile respect for freedom of conscience with respect for the moral equality that the liberal state must demonstrate. So, for example:

> A Muslim teacher who wears a headscarf in class may be viewed as compromising the neutrality of the public schools, which would be a derogation of the norm requiring that public institutions treat all citizens equally. Conversely, preventing the teacher from wearing a headscarf… enhances the appearance of neutrality of the institution of learning but restricts the teacher's freedom of conscience and religion; or, it undermines the principle of equal opportunity by closing the door to a career

[87] Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 4.
[88] Ibid. 4

by means of which she might have made her contribution to society.[89]

European countries have settled this question in different ways. Taylor and Maclure believe that looking at how liberal democracies reconcile these two aims (respect for moral equality and respect for freedom of conscience) better enables us to draw out the differences that exist between political systems than we could by using the typologies of social scientists, which are based on how the state relates to the church (whether through "establishment" or "separation"). While those typologies contain elements of truth about the principles of the modern Western state as a political and legal system, they fail to describe the contradictions of secularism, where, for instance, separating Church and State and relegating religion to the private sphere is compatible with a majority of people still professing belief in God and practicing their religion. Focusing on the how secularism's two aims are reconciled allows Taylor and Maclure to compare different regimes. They distinguish between republican models of secularism that favor the growth of a common civic identity and force religious affiliations back into the private sphere and liberal-pluralism models that try to find the optimal balance between respect for moral equality and respect for freedom of conscience.[90]

Examining modern political arrangements based on how respect for moral equality and respect for freedom of conscience are reconciled has an additional advantage. It does not only foreground conflicts between secularisms' principal aims, it also foregrounds the ends that secularism is trying to realize. That end might be to banish religion from "public" spaces or to help us manage the ethical and political conflicts that come with the moral and religious diversity of contemporary societies. Their argument is that if liberal secular democracies are to be truly liberal and pluralist, they will evidence neutrality towards religious, spiritual, or secular conceptions of the good. Efforts to banish religion from public spaces are a means (though misguided) not an end and divert us from secularism's proper end, which is to help manage our ethical and political conflicts. Taylor and Maclure propose that liberal democracies need to pursue policies that are politically secular (which affirm their independence from religion using positive law) but do not promote social secularization (the erosion of the influence of religion in social practices and in the conduct of individual lives).[91]

---

[89] Ibid., 24, 25.
[90] Ibid., 34.
[91] Ibid., 16.

Sources of the Self and *A Secular Age* also focus on secularism, but in those two books Taylor is more concerned with moral sources of contemporary societies than with their institutional arrangements. Although Taylor says very little about conscience in *Sources of the Self* or *A Secular Age*, his approach to secularization in both can help us see the pressures on modern conscience in a new light. Taylor's treatment of secularization in both works offers a different kind of story about the shifts that led to secularization, a story which permits us to see conscience not just as a political necessity for managing our conflicts but also as an experiential imperative in a secular age. To understand conscience in this new light, we first need to give some more attention to Taylor's characterization of the modern moral order and how it came to be.

Moral sources and religious possibility in a secular age

The immanent frame

Taylor identifies the highest good in the modern moral order as immanent human flourishing.[92] For this reason, he describes the moral framework of the modern moral order as the "immanent frame." The immanent frame is meant to capture the context of secular modernity, a context best understood as one in which a naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent is no longer possible.[93] The immanent frame is "a this-worldly order that we have come to imagine together, whether or not we take this to be the final word on reality."[94] It holds whether we believe that the transcendent is the fulfilment of the greatest good or an obstacle to it, "a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction" or as "answering to our deepest craving, need."[95] So the immanent frame is something that we all share in the modern West–regardless of what we believe.

The immanent frame is, therefore, best understood as the unconscious or unformulated construct of our whole situation, the pre-theoretical background upon which particular

---

[92] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 632.
[93] Taylor's language of immanence and fullness are controversial. In responding to his critics, Taylor says he regrets having used the terms as so many have read his distinction between immanence and transcendence as watertight. For attempts to clarify his meaning, see Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on *a Secular Age*," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010): 350. Paul D. Janz, "Transcendence, 'Spin', and the Jamesian Open Space," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age*, ed. Justin D. Klassen and Carlos D. Colorado (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 47-50.
[94] Charles Taylor, "Challenging Issues About the Secular Age," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010): 412.
[95] *A Secular Age*, 548.

features of our world show up for us.[96] And that is because the immanent frame is not a set of beliefs (either the belief in transcendence or the denial of it) but rather the context in which we develop our beliefs and from which all our moral and religious questioning now proceeds.[97] The immanent frame is characterized by a particular understanding of ourselves: buffered, disengaged, living in a disenchanted world.

Exclusive humanism

A characteristic of the immanent order is that it can be envisaged without reference to God; however, the immanent frame does not rule out all conceptions of God as active in history and in human experience.[98] In fact, how you orient yourself in the context of the immanent frame and what form of life you pursue in it depends on your take on things. Taylor describes two different stances we might take. Some inhabit this context as an open space out of a recognition that is possible to have a different take on things. In this open space they can feel the tug of alternatives and the force of each opposing position, without concluding that atheism, reductive naturalism or materialism necessarily follow.[99] The option of taking this stance is available to all of us whether or not we believe in some transcendent source or power.[100] Yet there are others who inhabit this context as a closed space, in which they cannot imagine things being otherwise. Taylor explains that if we perceive our take on transcendence–whatever that may be–to be just the way things are, our view is closed. Although the immanent frame does not compel either an open or a closed view, in certain milieux closure is hegemonic. Exclusive humanism is Taylor's term for treating the immanent frame as closed.

The problem with exclusive humanism is that it does not just envision life without reference

[96] Ibid., 171.
[97] Ibid., 549. This means that even those believers who defend the supernatural now live within the paradigm of the immanent frame. This paradigm is, after all, one that makes a distinction between the natural and the supernatural, a distinction earlier ages would have resisted. Ibid., 542, 48.
[98] For a different account of various fundamental orientations between transcendence and immanence, and an assessment of their potential to produce and sustain a political subjectivity capable of criticism and change, see Geoffrey Holsclaw, *Transcending Subjects: Augustine, Hegel and Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).
[99] Taylor describes this posture as standing in the Jamesian open space, a reference to William James's description of an existentially "open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.
[100] In particular, Taylor has in mind those "who want to respect as much as they can the 'scientific' shape of the immanent order, as they have been led to see it; or who fear the effect of religious 'fanaticism'; but who still cannot help believing that there is something more than the merely immanent." Ibid., 548.

to God, it treats open readings of human agency, culture and history as intellectually indefensible instances of wishful thinking or immaturity that are unworthy of serious consideration. Taylor counters that both open and closed views actually require a "leap of faith," by which he means that we are pushed or rather drawn to embrace one or the other position. Our sense of how things are is anticipatory and leaps ahead of the reasons we could offer for having taken either stance.[101] In making the case for transcendence, Taylor wants to release secular humanists from the false certainty of closure, as if closure were a self-evident truth rather than a way of spinning things.

Mainstream secularization theory

Mainstream secularization theory tends to tell the story of secularization as one in which we substituted one set of beliefs for another–in this case, new rational or scientific ones supplanted the old religious beliefs that once dominated–as if to be secular was to deny the existence of God or to affirm the triumph of science over religion. Taylor takes pains to show that this is a misunderstanding. While the process of modernization did instigate a change in us, it was not just a change in what we might believe but rather a change in our whole way of being in the world and of experiencing it. The difference between our secular age and earlier ages is not located in the catalogue of beliefs available to us but rather in the conditions of belief, that is, in the "default assumptions about what is believable," as one commentator put it.[102]

Part of the problem is that mainstream secularization theory recounts the development of secularization by telling how one set of theories came to be replaced by another (how Biblical cosmology was displaced by evolutionary theory, for instance). This relies upon a narration of loss or of "subtraction" where modernity and secularity are described as emerging once people "lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge... [releasing certain] underlying features of human nature which were there all along but had been impeded by what is now set aside."[103] Taylor maintains that the secular is not the remainder left over once belief in God has been eliminated from the equation, as subtraction stories suggest. Rather the

[101] Ibid., 550-1.
[102] James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 19.
[103] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

secular is the sum view of the world we now have after the addition of new ways of imagining meaning and significance that do not depend on transcendence.

Taylor explains that subtraction stories are subtractive not only in the sense that they presume that the development of modernity involved cutting ourselves free from fanciful, ignorant, and superstitious beliefs. They are also subtractive in the sense of oversimplifying the story, typically by prioritizing one factor as the major force in secularization (whether that is the rise of modern science or the development of the modern stat). These sorts of reductions misconstrue religious beliefs and practices to fit the constraints of the interpretive frame, which is why subtraction narratives cannot account for the full panoply of religious beliefs now available to us in the secular age. Finally, mainstream secularization theory's narrative of subtraction is distortive because it obscures the central role Christianity has played in the creation of a humanist alternative to faith. Taylor believes he can give a more convincing account of our secular age, one that puts modernization in its proper frame, that is as a "historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution)."[104]

Taylor's story of secularization

Taylor contends that if we want to understand what it means to be secular, we need to trace the transformations wrought by Western modernity with an eye to the development of the immanent frame. For it is the immanent frame that permits us to see how the context of belief and the conditions of belief have actually changed over the last five hundred years. It also allows us to see how those changes have in turn re-shaped what kind of experiences of the human condition and of the world are now possible for us. This involves telling the story of secularization in a way that highlights the changes that have taken place in our perception at a pre-theoretical level, including the perception that believing in God is no longer easy, as opposed to the perception that belief in God was something that could be taken for granted and simply a part of what it means to be human. Taylor believes that only by seeing how the whole frame came into place can we appreciate the great cultural

[104] Taylor's conception of modernity is spelled out in the companion volume that Taylor wrote in tandem with *A Secular Age*. See *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

transformation that Western modernity has generated, including new understandings of the self, society, time, space and agency.[105] By narrating these transformations he hopes to break open closed readings of the immanent frame.

Mainstream secularization theory holds that advances in education and science marginalized religious ideas in public life leading to a decline in belief; however, it is not the case that religion has simply become less credible in a disenchanted world. Taylor's thesis is that the obstacles to belief are not epistemic; they are moral. He argues that only new and powerful ethical ideas, put forward by exclusive humanism, could have countered the force of traditional religious ideas in people's lives and caused them to drift towards unbelief.[106] These new ethical ideas include commitments to altruism, benevolence and justice, and they offer the most significant sources of moral motivation. They also lead to a distinctive and powerful vision of agency characterized by autonomy, sovereignty and dignity. As Taylor puts it, "forging your identity through self-definition is accompanied by a sense of exhilaration and power."[107] Exclusive humanism was embraced because it gives us a vision of ourselves as distanced, free and controlling. It is this vision which gave immanence its compelling frame so that it becomes "the near-unsurpassable horizon of our thinking, acting, and judging, indeed, of our 'age.'"[108]

Reform and the shift from agape to altruism

Taylor's thesis is that the shift to secularity can be attributed to a tension felt within Latin Christendom and efforts to resolve that tension. This tension, internal to Christian thought and inherent within it, is between directing life to meet daily needs, so as to foster some degree of human flourishing in this world and directing life to the Good that transcends this world and lies beyond ordinary human flourishing. It is a tension that stems from the demand for the total transformation of one's life (which means being ready to renounce everything and follow God, even to the cross) and the ongoing demands to meet the immediate concerns of ordinary life and the obligations of work, family, and friends.[109]

---

[105] These include, for instance, new perceptions of ourselves "as autonomous subjects, as beings who can revel in choice, as citizens among others in a sovereign people, as potentially in control of history." *A Secular Age*, 573.
[106] Ibid., 567.
[107] *Hegel*, 9.
[108] Hent de Vries, "The Deep Conditions of Secularity," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010): 391.
[109] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 80-81.

In earlier ages, there were sanctioned ways of easing the tension that builds up from the pressure of attending to the everyday and attending to the transcendent. The example that Taylor turns to most often is of Carnival, a period in which the ordinary order of things was inverted or the world was turned upside down. As Taylor explains, "boys wore the mitre, or fools were made kings for a day; what was ordinarily revered was mocked, people permitted themselves a form of license, not just sexually but also in close-to-violent acts, and the like."[110] The festival of Carnival and other rituals of reversal permitted people to let off steam through jesting, mockery and mayhem.

The tension was also accommodated through a two-tiered division of labor (one of the distinctions Carnival turned on its head). There were those with special vocations, namely monks and nuns, who aspired to perfection and who devoted themselves to it on behalf of the wider society. And there were the laity who did not live up to the demands of perfection but who helped sustain those on the path of perfection and were carried along by them in turn. This two-tier system, initially intended to show forth the complementarity of all lives in God's service, took on a hierarchical cast in which those with monastic, clerical, or renunciative vocations were set above ordinary lay vocations as the functions of their vocations were accorded more dignity. Although the division between those with special vocations and those with ordinary ones could be obscured by a degree of mutual service where the clergy prayed for the laity and the laity defended and labored for the clergy–a system of "hierarchical complimentarity"–those particular functions were not esteemed to have the same worth. The end result was a distinction between first- and second-class Christians, that is, between elite Christians who tried to fulfil the gospels and ordinary Christians who were not expected to meet those higher moral demands.[111]

The impulse to close the gap between elite and ordinary piety, which had hitherto separated various forms of life, Taylor terms "Reform." Reform is a desire for the renewal of social life, rooted in the promise that "God is sanctifying us everywhere."[112] Taylor calls it "a drive to make over the whole of society to higher standards."[113] Taylor sees the Reformation, with its thoroughgoing rejection of the monastic life and its vision of a monastic discipline

[110] Ibid., 45-6.
[111] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 66, 81.
[112] Ibid., 79.
[113] Ibid., 63.

for everyone, as but one phase of the agenda of reform. Reform actually covers a number of movements and initiatives spanning three centuries, including the various phases of the Reformation and counter-Reformation. Movements of reform include both efforts to raise the bar so that more can be expected as all can live lives wholly dedicated to God whatever their station in life, and it includes strategies to lower the bar, so that less is going to be expected as the aspiration to transcend the world is obscured by the aim of flourishing here and now in this life. What these various movements shared was an impulse to make over the whole church and society, so that all Christians would be totally dedicated. As Taylor puts it, "reform demanded that everyone be a real, 100 percent Christian."[114]

Taylor traces how the impulse towards reform carried on beyond the Reformation and Counter-reformation, in 18th-century Deism with its emphasis on benevolence, and into the 19th-century with the emergence of exclusive secular humanism. The path to exclusive humanism is one that involves "zig-zags" and frequently doubles back on itself as Taylor's theme expands.[115] It is a long story the way Taylor tells it, full of ironies, contingencies, and unintended consequences; however, throughout the story Reform is identified as the motor that propelled the shifts leading to disenchantment, allowed the modern moral order to seep into our social imaginary, and made exclusive humanism a real possibility for large number of people.

It is possible to offer only the briefest account of what Taylor terms the "long march" to modernity that prepared the ground for exclusive humanism. To show how he sees the impact of Reform, we might start with the "taming of the nobility" to pick up just one strand in the story. The taming of the nobility refers to the transformation in the self-understanding of the nobility and gentry after the War of the Roses, as they came to see themselves no longer as semi-independent warriors but as courtiers who advised and served royal power. This represented a shift from feudal nobility to a nobility of servants to the Crown and "brought with it new models of sociability, new ideals, and new notions of the training required to fulfil their role."[116] For instance this ideal of courtesy imposed norms of polish and refinement and prioritized humanistic training in persuasive and courteous conversation in place of training in ritualized combat such as jousting.

---

[114] Ibid., 774.
[115] Ibid., 95.
[116] *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 34.

The Renaissance interest in courtesy can be seen in a larger context where it merges with the notion of civility in the nascent modern state. The taming of the nobility is related here to the need to cultivate industrious, disciplined, reliable people for the sake of establishing a new social order. For this reason,

> [W]e need to understand the notion of civility not just in the context of the taming of the nobility, but in relation to the much more widespread and ambitious attempt to make over all classes of society through new forms of discipline economic, military, religious, moral–which are a striking feature of European society from at least the seventeenth century. This transformation was powered both by the aspiration to a more complete religious reform, both Protestant and Catholic, and by the ambitions of states to achieve more military power and hence, as a necessary condition, a more productive economy.[117]

This is the agenda of reform at work. Taylor explains, "we can say that while late medieval elites, clerical of course, but with a growing lay component, were developing ideals of more intense devotion and were coming to demand church reform, members of the same elites–sometimes others, sometimes the same people–were developing/recovering the ideal of civility, with its demands for a more ordered, less violent social existence."[118] These complex religious and political agendas of reform propelled a number of changes that reflected a growing inability among elites to tolerate what came to be seen as violent, uncontrolled or disordered in popular culture. Taylor has in mind programs such as the enactment of the poor laws in the fifteenth century, aimed to distinguish between those who are capable of work and those who have no recourse but to charity, which put the former to work at very low pay and gave the latter relief or confinement; the suppression of Carnival for violating the ideal of civility and the place of the sacred by city governments and church authorities; and the imposition of personal methods of self-control and discipline meant to spread civility from the ruling strata to broader sections of society.[119] Programs such as these amounted to a progressive imposition of order. They also brought in their wake "a new self-understanding of our social existence, one that gave unprecedented primacy to the individual."[120]

---

[117] Ibid., 39.
[118] Ibid., 41.
[119] Taylor is thinking of methods of spiritual discipline such as the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola as well as the cognitive exercises of Descartes, but also of the new modes of training of armies in the sixteenth century that Foucault described, the principles of which were later applied to schools, hospitals and then factories.
[120] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 146; *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 50.

The shift from understanding ourselves as deeply embedded in society to understanding ourselves as individuals first is particularly significant for Taylor's story.[121] He holds that "this was not just a revolution in our neutral view of ourselves, but involved a profound change in our moral world, as is always the case with identity shifts."[122] That change in our moral world inaugurated a modern understanding moral order. What began to emerge in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Taylor argues, is a new moral order derived from the modern natural law theories of Grotius and Locke.[123]

Taylor sees the idea of this order going through many redactions but identifies four features that stand out as constants. First, political society starts with individuals and exists for their sake. In the modern ideal of moral order the individual agent precedes society, in contrast with the pre-modern understanding that a person "can be a proper moral agent only when embedded in a larger social whole, whose very nature is to exhibit a hierarchical complimentarity."[124] Second, the goal of political institutions is to secure for individuals the "conditions of existence as free agents," which are the benefits of life and the means to life.[125] Third, political society is ordered so as to secure individual freedom, which finds expression in term of rights. Individuals are understood as autonomous and as free to shape their own lives as well as the social order founded on their consent. Fourth, these rights, freedoms, and mutual benefit are to be secured to all individuals equally. As a result,

---

[121] Taylor goes to some length to distinguish between various forms of individualism, including the kind of individual stance that has to do with taking responsibility upon oneself and for oneself; the individualism that entails self-examination, self-development and authentic living; and the individualism in which each pursues his own good in his own way bound only by voluntarily assumed obligations to any common good. While Taylor is wary of this later atomistic or instrumental individualism because it fosters the delusion of Reform that supposes we can attain mastery of ourselves and of the world, he is in fact cautiously sympathetic to the instrumentalisms of responsibility, self-examination, self-development and authenticity. They can enable people to live in ways that are open to transcendent moral sources. *A Secular Age*, 541. See also *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). As he will argue Christianity is itself individualist in the sense that it understands the human relationship with God, with the transcendent, to be a personal relationship, one that should bring into being a community of persons in relation to God, which exists not merely for mutual benefit but for the sake of love. *A Secular Age*, 282. For an insightful account of Taylor's treatment of authentic individuality and genuine community, see Jennifer A. Herdt, "The Authentic Individual in the Network of Agape," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos Colorado and Justin Klassen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

[122] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 65.

[123] This part of Taylor's story is very sketchy. The transformations wrought by modern natural law theorists in their efforts to provide a nonsectarian account of Christianity which might secure peace after the wars of religion are better detailed elsewhere. See, for instance: Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[124] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 19.

[125] Ibid., 20.

> the central moral concern becomes the imposition of a disciplined order on personal and social life, ensuring high standards of self-control and good behavior in the individual, and peace, order and prosperity in society.... The highest goals of human beings seem, even in the sphere of religion, to aim at purely human goods. When, on top of this, there begins to be serious progress towards these goals, the idea can gain currency that these ends are within the scope of unaided human powers.[126]

Exclusive humanism arose alongside an alternative set of moral sources for the modern moral order's ethic of freedom and mutual benefit.[127] If the modern ethic of freedom and mutual benefit gave us the confidence that we can actually shape and re-order our lives using discipline and disengaged reasoning, then this alternative set of moral sources provided the motivation to universalize this project by carrying it out for benefit of all. This alternative set of moral sources included benevolence, human sympathy and altruism. Taylor argues that exclusive humanism became a conceivable option once the moral goals–"self-control and good behavior in the individual, and peace, order and prosperity in society"–were brought down into the human realm. At this point people could see themselves as having the moral ability to meet their goals without calling for God's aid.

Taylor identifies the order of mutual benefit, with its impulse to universal altruism, as a secularization of the Christian call to love the neighbor (such that the neighbor includes the stranger, the alien, even one's enemy). So what exclusive humanism defines as moral fullness and devotes itself to–benevolence–is in fact an analogue for the spirituality of agape. Together the combination of new ethical ideas planted by Christianity about how we are to live together in society and new ethical sources to motivate us to act for the universal human good eventually created the conditions for this secular age. Taylor's argument is that secularism is in fact dependent upon Christianity, and "it would probably not have been possible to make the transition to exclusive humanism on any other basis."[128]

The malaise of immanence

> We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on.... [W]e are aware today that one can live the spiritual life differently; that power, fullness, exile, etc., can take different shapes.… [We have moved] from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naïvely

[126] *A Secular Age*, 260-61.
[127] Ibid., 259.
[128] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 247.

> within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone's construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option.[129]

Taylor has re-narrated the story of secularization in order to trace how people came to see themselves as capable of mustering the will to act for universal human good on an unprecedented scale without God's help. Either through enlightenment, discipline and rational self-control, as the Enlightenment view suggested, or through tapping inner resources of sympathy, as the Romantic view proposed, or indeed through a combination of the two.[130] Reform is his name for the processes which made this self-image a conceivable option. On his account, living in a secular age means living a cultural and political situation in which, as Fergus Kerr put it, "belief in a divinely-created world with divinely-instituted moral law has gone, or is going, and in which we thus seem to be left with nothing but our own minds and wills to generate ethical ideals and moral practices."[131] Yet there is a certain malaise, a vague sense that something may have been lost with the "eclipse of transcendence."[132]

Taylor describes our discomfort with exclusive humanism in terms of the experience of cross-pressures, fragilization and optionality. Cross pressures are part of what Taylor calls the "malaise of immanence," a feeling of flatness that has to do with a nagging sense of loss of meaning that is sometimes accompanied by a nostalgia for enchantment.[133] They issue from "the draw of narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other."[134] Indeed, they are cross pressures because many of those who recoil from the materialist atheist position also reject orthodox religion. So people feel pushed from both sides.

Taylor contends that cross pressures define contemporary culture as a whole.[135] Even those who are firmly entrenched in their positions cannot help but be aware that many people do not share their views, an awareness which can cause consternation even righteous indignation. Taylor sees these cross pressures generating two conditions. Cross pressures

---

[129] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 11, 14.
[130] Ibid., 257.
[131] Fergus Kerr, "How Much Can a Philosopher Do?," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010): 327.
[132] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 307.
[133] Ibid., 309.
[134] Ibid., 303, 595.
[135] Ibid., 598.

may spur a return to transcendent outlooks and traditional forms of faith, but they may also propel people to create new positions from which to pursue meaning and fullness in the absence of transcendence. There has been an explosion of options that are being devised to find meaning within the immanent order in response to the intensity of the cross pressures acting on the buffered self. Taylor has in mind not only the new options generated by Freud and Nietzsche, but also those generated by Goethe and D.H. Lawrence.[136] More recent options include the search for spiritual wholeness that is tied to the pursuit of self-development and wellbeing, such as the "power of positive thinking" propounded by Norman Vincent Peale in the 1950s and the proliferation of New Age modes of practice that blend spirituality and therapy.[137] He also identifies a new kind of spiritual quest characterized by assembling one's own personal outlook through meditation, special forms of prayer, participation in study groups, taking a pilgrimage to Taize or attending a gathering such as World Youth Day.[138] As a result of these new quests "we are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane."[139] Taylor portrays the contemporary scene in this way:

> It is marked by an unheard-of pluralism of outlooks, religious, non-religious and anti-religious, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing without end. It is marked in consequence by a great deal of mutual fragilization, and hence movement between different outlooks. It naturally depends on one's milieu, but it is harder and harder to find a niche where either belief or unbelief go without saying.... Religious belief now exists in a field of choices which include various forms of demurral and rejection; Christian faith exists in a field where there is also a wide range of other spiritual options.[140]

The "fragilization" of all beliefs (religious and anti-religious) is the second condition generated by cross pressures. Fragilization is Taylor's term for the sense that my religious commitments have been put in question and are felt to be fragile. Fragilization comes about through contact with others who do not share my faith but who embody plausible alternative ways of life. It raises the question "why my way, and not hers?"[141] And it has to do with the fact that people today have a heightened sense of awareness about the existence of alternatives to their own position on belief, whatever that position may be. Taylor sees

[136] Ibid., 313.
[137] Ibid., 509.
[138] Ibid., 514, 17.
[139] Ibid., 300.
[140] Ibid., 437.
[141] Ibid., 304.

evidence of fragilization in the hesitancy many people feel about making a religious commitment and in the increased movement between various religious identities and communities.[142]

In certain passages, Taylor seems to suggest that the mere existence of multiple religious and nonreligious possibilities generates fragilization but in others he suggests that hardcore believers and unbelievers, whether they align themselves with the New Atheists or with religious fundamentalist groups, are less likely to experience it. So fragilization, like cross pressures, may be limited to those who come to stand in the open space of the immanent frame where one "can actually feel some of the force of each opposing position." [143] It is difficult to draw conclusions about the scope of fragilization from Taylor's account of it as some of the passages contradict others.[144] However widespread it may be, the phenomenon itself comes down to the way individual believers now experience their own faith with some sense of contingency and relativity.

Taylor's identification of cross pressures and fragilization does more than simply point to the fact of religious pluralism. Pluralism (in the sense of people with different faiths living in the same city) existed in pre-modern contexts and in other places in the world without having the same fragilizing effects. What is new is the sense that the alternative embodied by another could be conceivable for me. Ruth Abbey explains that "what matters is not just that a dizzying array of religious and nonreligious options exists, but also that… the existence of alternative religious and nonreligious options makes it hard for people in modern Western societies to take it for granted that their own position is unquestionably correct."[145] Cross pressures and fragilization try to capture the sense today that the myriad of other positions I come across can raise questions in my mind about unassailability of my own position. Taylor's analysis of the impact of unbelief and of the multiplicity of faiths on

---

[142] Ibid., 598.
[143] Ibid., 549.
[144] Ruth Abbey has tried to bring more clarity to Taylor's complicated thesis about cross pressures and fragilization by canvassing his claims about how widespread they really are in contemporary religious experience and whether they actually prevent people from holding onto their beliefs with as much tenacity or cause them to covert more often. She maintains that Taylor's thesis would benefit from including the experiences of people who have undergone these "religious realignments" and that without them it is hard to assess how vital phenomena such as cross pressures and fragilization really are for an understanding the secularity of the secular age. She concludes that Taylor's references to cross pressures and fragilization are more rhetorical than analytical and a part of his argument in favor of living the immanent frame in an open way. See Ruth Abbey, "Theorizing Secularity 3," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).
[145] Ibid., 105.

the experience of believing today is related to the fact that religious belief has become optional. Cross pressures and the fragilization effect stem from this sense of optionality.[146]

Going back to Taylor's analysis of the new consequences of pluralism on society, it becomes clear that conditions in society have shortened the distances between us so that there is more contact and exchange with those who have taken different moral and religious positions. Taylor says that as we become more and more like each other, we come to realize that there are other positions we could take and that the one we happen to take is an option. This is how he depicts the plurality of contemporary secular society and the sense of optionality:

> Of course, our society is different from earlier ones in which virtually everybody believed in or experienced the same shape of spirituality. But it is also different from other societies, such as India has been for centuries, and the Ottoman Empire was, to take two examples, in which everyone was aware of many spiritual positions being lived in one's society. But this could be so without one's feeling that some other position was a real existential option for one.... But for many people today, members of their own family live some other position; moreover, there have been shifts within the family, and new changes are always taking place. Moreover, everyone is aware that this isn't a rare fact about my family alone but is very widespread.... This is what it is to see one's stance as in this sense an option.... It has nothing to do with my being ready or even vaguely tempted to exercise an option to change.[147]

When Taylor says that belief is now an option, he means that it we can no longer regard either religion or its alternatives as providing all of society with normative foundations. The fragilization that accompanies this realization is not so much a faltering in faith–my faith may still be robust–as it is an unsettling awareness that my faith can be viewed as merely one plausible option among others.[148] One reviewer offered this description of how believers experience optionality: "religious convictions themselves have been inwardly 'destabilized.' Even if we regard our faith as firm, we know that it is considered implausible, even irrational, by rival perspectives that we know to be credible."[149] But Taylor would be

---

[146] We have Hent de Vries to thank for coining the term optionality. See de Vries, "The Deep Conditions of Secularity. " De Vries' treatment of the optional nature of faith is too perplexing to restate here unfortunately, and Taylor himself has dismissed it as a misreading: Charles Taylor, "Challenging Issues About the Secular Age," Ibid.: 416.

[147] Italics his. *A Secular Age*, 415-6.

[148] The optional nature of religious belief can give people the sense that they "can wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitely in any one." Ibid., 351.

[149] Matthew Rose, "Tayloring Christianity," *First Things* (2014), http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/12/tayloring-christianity.

the first to point out that if we have actually freed ourselves from the secularization thesis and from the widespread cultural assumption that secularism has obviated religious beliefs, we would perceive that disbelief is also optional. For optionality places the burden of proof not only on those who maintain a religious outlook but also on those whose maintain a humanist one as well.[150]

The pressures on conscience

High moral ideals place great moral demands on us

> During these past four centuries, the idea of moral order implicit in this view of society has undergone a double expansion: in extension (more people live by it; it has become dominant) and in intensity (the demands it makes are heavier and more ramified).[151]

Modern secular culture, with its aspirations to universal benevolence and justice, sets high moral standards for us to live up to. It assumes that we ought to lay stronger demands on ourselves than we have in the past and that we are capable of making greater sacrifices to meet those demands. Reflecting on the legacy of Reform over the past four centuries, Taylor muses that "never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, and so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates."[152]

The question for Taylor is whether the modern moral order has a moral source that is strong enough to empower us to meet those standards. The modern moral order's ethic of benevolence is meant to be motivated by our recognition of the dignity of others but is that enough given how much is demanded of us?[153] Does it actually enable us to overcome the limits to human action created by "our restricted sympathies, our understandable self-preoccupation, and the common human tendency to define one's identity in opposition to

[150] Here I concur with Jennifer Herdt's reading of Taylor. Herdt, "The Authentic Individual in the Network of Agape."
[151] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 5.
[152] *A Secular Age*, 695.
[153] Ibid., 694.

some adversary or out group?"[154] Or does modern secular culture aim higher than is sustained by its moral sources?[155]

Taylor holds that the moral sources undergirding the Enlightenment project cannot adequately inspire us with confidence or hope that the goods it aspires to are realizable, and that is the notion of the human good put forward by exclusive humanism is inherently unstable. The modern liberal virtues have a theoretical shakiness, because they are not securely grounded in the common good. Exclusive humanism has cut off altruism and these other virtues from the transcendent source of fullness and wholeness, agape, which had traditionally sustained the humanistic enterprise. That theoretical shakiness makes it difficult for us to say what moral consideration we want to give priority to and why. Given that the moral sources of exclusive humanism are not up to the task of overcoming moral inarticulacy, there is good reason to fear they are not up to the task of helping us live up to our moral commitments, especially when it comes to sustaining our far-reaching moral commitments to benevolence and justice. To put it another way, the modern moral order is underfunded: it places big demands on us while providing only weak moral resources for meeting them.[156]

The dangers of living beyond our moral means

> The question which arises from all this is whether we are not living beyond our moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of justice and benevolence.[157]

Taylor says we cannot rely on benevolence or universal sympathy to help us forge an identification with the common good and create social solidarity, for those same solidarities can also engender violence, war, persecution, and every form of scapegoating. Taylor has in mind the way a desire to help the poor, vulnerable and oppressed can fuel both bitter disappointment in those who fall short in their offer of help and contempt for any who stand in the way. So, while altruism can inspire us to act for justice it "can slide into something trivial, ugly or downright dangerous and destructive."[158] Taylor explains:

---

[154] Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," 172.
[155] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516.
[156] *A Secular Age*, 518.
[157] *Sources of the Self*, 517.
[158] *A Secular Age*, 698.

> The tragic irony is that the higher the sense of potential, the more grievously do real people fall short and the more severe the turnaround that is inspired by the disappointment. A lofty humanism posits high standards of self-worth and a magnificent goal to strive toward. It inspires enterprises of great moment. But by this very token it encourages force, despotism, tutelage, ultimately contempt, and a certain ruthlessness in shaping refractory human material–oddly enough, the same horrors that Enlightenment critique picked up in societies and institutions dominated by religion, and for the same causes. The difference of belief here is not crucial. Wherever action for high ideals is not tempered, controlled, and ultimately engulfed in an unconditional love of the beneficiaries, this ugly dialectic risks repetition.[159]

The modern liberal virtues simply do not create a sufficiently firm identification with the common good; therefore, they have a propensity to become vices. This is the way philanthropy becomes misanthropy:

> Philanthropy–the love of the human–can gradually come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression. The action is broken off or, worse, continues but is invested now with these new feelings, becoming progressively more coercive and inhumane. The history of despotic socialism (i.e., twentieth-century communism) is replete with this tragic turn, brilliantly foreseen by Dostoyevsky more than a hundred years ago ("Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived at unlimited despotism"), and then repeated again and again with a fatal regularity.[160]

Taylor concludes it is self-destructive to continue to live beyond our moral means.[161] So we have a choice to make. Either we need to lower our standards of justice and benevolence so that we do not expect as much of ourselves or we need to find stronger moral sources that can sustain our allegiance to high moral standards of justice and benevolence.

Conscience as an existential imperative

Taylor's treatment of exclusive humanism and its moral sources offers a different kind of story about the shifts that led to secularization, as a story which permits us to see conscience not just as a political necessity for managing our conflicts but also as an experiential imperative in a secular age. The experiences of malaise associated with the immanent frame–contestability, cross-pressures, fragilization, optionality–show that we need a

[159] Ibid., 697. Cf. *A Catholic Modernity?*, 20.
[160] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 697. Cf. *A Catholic Modernity?*, 19.
[161] *A Secular Age*, 699.

pluralistic ethic with a firmer basis than altruism can provide. It also indicates why in the absence of such an ethic, we tend to turn to conscience to describe certain sorts of moral decisions.

Weak moral sources lead to an over-reliance on modern conscience as individualistic. Modern conscience has an aura of universality about it and yet seems to hold the individual's particular experiences and expressive aspirations. Understood as a feature of self-defining agency, that same particularism seems to performatively enact individuality thus containing its own rationale, which might be offered in lieu of other motivations we might struggle to articulate in a secular age given the moral sources we can invoke. In the absence of stronger moral sources, modern conscience promises to affirm the universal ethical imperative and the subject's own individual experience of it and to ease the tension between the two. My contention is that appeals to conscience can be read as an attempt to break the ceiling of immanence, as part of the "revolt against immanence."[162]

Taylor sees this as a "revolt from within unbelief [...] against the primacy of life."[163] And it points to an ontological feature of selfhood, namely that human beings aspire to go "beyond life," to have contact with something of intrinsic value beyond human flourishing.[164] This human need to go beyond life is not without its dangers, whether it manifests itself outside of traditional religion or within it. In the first case, Taylor refers to a modern fascination with death and violence and in the second case, to human sacrifice and intercommunal massacres.[165] Notwithstanding these darker sides of the longing to go beyond life, Taylor claims that humans aspire to some form of transcendence, whether this aspiration takes shape in religion, in a fascination with the sublime, an interest in the wilderness, or in art, where people also look for a quasi-spiritual nourishment. For all its secularity, "our modern culture is restless at the barriers of the human sphere."[166]

The way forward: sources outside the self

> Just having appropriate beliefs is no solution to these dilemmas, and the transformation of high ideals into brutal practice was demonstrated lavishly in

[162] *A Catholic Modernity?*, 13.
[163] Ibid., 26-7.
[164] Ibid., 20, 109.
[165] Ibid., 28, cf. 18.
[166] *A Secular Age*, 726.

> Christendom, well before modern humanism came on the scene. So, is there a way out? This cannot be a matter of guarantee, only of faith. But it is clear that Christian spirituality points to one. It can be described in two ways: either as a love or compassion that is unconditional–that is, not based on what you the recipient have made of yourself–or as one based on what you are most profoundly, a being in the image of God.[167]

Taylor believes we need to find stronger moral sources outside the subject that can sustain our allegiance to our moral standards and overcome excessive individualism.[168] Taylor wants us to recognize that humans owe their power to realize the highest good not to a source within themselves but to a source beyond them, which is more than immanent and yet "inseparably indexed to a personal vision."[169] That transcendent power is the source of agape, which allows us to show the unconditional love that is necessary for us to act beyond our capacities for unconditional love and sacrifice. He holds that "religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective, what Chantal Milon-Delsol calls a désir d'éternité, remains a strong independent source of motivation in modernity."[170] And only agape can overcome the individualism of the modern secular age. Agape creates the personal transformation of one's capacities so one can act in love for the sake of others; it empowers the social transformation that can break the excessive individualism and excarnation of religion. It does this by creating new solidarities and by giving us "standing among others in the stream of love." What is more, agape makes new forms of social existence possible, through which individual Christian identity might be ordered communally and embedded in traditions and institutions.

Breaking the immanent frame to acknowledge a source outside ourselves holds significant potential to take the pressure off modern conscience. With a strong source such as agape, we no longer need to treat decisions of conscience as the way to overcome the inarticulacy of modern moral theories, something claims of conscience rarely do in any case. Agape also provides a way of reconciling the universal with the singular so that we do not have to appeal to conscience to ease the tension between them. For the Christian ethic, as one commentator on *A Secular Age* points out, "constitutes a way of beginning with the material, such that it might persuasively address and overcome the 'gap' between the universal and

---

[167] *A Catholic Modernity?*, 35.
[168] *A Secular Age*, 726.
[169] *Sources of the Self*, 510.
[170] *A Secular Age*, 530.

the particular, between the measure of goodness and that which is to be measured–the gap Taylor believes is the primary modern obstacle to genuine fullness."[171]

Conclusion

This chapter has examined why it is difficult to provide reasons that would make plain the moral motivations behind claims of conscience. Positioning Charles Taylor's work on moral inarticulacy alongside his treatment of self-defining subjectivity, allowed me to uncover the philosophical roots of modern conceptions of conscience and to situate the problem of conscience in the unresolved debates of modernity. Extrapolating from Taylor's work on secularism, I showed why people are pressured to rely on conscience as a moral principle despite the difficulties it poses. I examined Taylor's proposes that we need to give transcendent love credence as a strong moral motivation and that doing so opens the possibility of overcoming moral inarticulacy. I argued that doing so may also alleviate the over reliance on conscience-talk, the showstopper designed to break the impasses of Enlightenment debates about justification through procedures and rules and give us a better starting place from which to reconceptualize conscience. Before that work can begin, we need to examine what the beautiful soul can teach about conceptualizing conscience and making claims of conscience in public discourse.

[171] Klassen,"The Affirmation of Existential Life in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*," 19.

III

Romantic self-expression epitomized: the figure of the beautiful soul

Introduction

What is entailed in organizing one's moral life by drawing only upon sources found within the self? How would one go about generating ethical ideals and moral practices with nothing but one's own mind and will? One particular figure in Romantic literature offers an important depiction of what following individual conscience looks like under those conditions, where one cannot or will not rely upon sources beyond the self. That figure was known as the beautiful soul (*die schöne Seele* or *la belle âme*). The beautiful soul came to prominence at a time when few moral certainties existed. While discussions of what a good life consisted in drifted away from Christian doctrine and became moored in other philosophical and political projects of secular modernity, the beautiful soul stood in for a traditional saint, providing an ideal to aspire to and emulate. In this way, the figure of the beautiful soul acted as a guiding light inspiring not only the popular imagination but also the imaginations of diverse thinkers responding to the issues of the age such as the disenchantment of nature, the Kantian revolution, the French revolution, the industrial revolution, the growing influence of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of the nation-state.

This chapter is concerned with the beautiful soul as an important trope of conscience and with what it can teach us about the pitfalls of relying upon weak moral sources. I begin by situating the figure of the beautiful soul in literature and theory. I then examine the beautiful soul as a depiction of what it feels like to organize your life solely according to your conscience. In order to show how the beautiful soul depicts this, the rest of the chapter is devoted to drawing out the key moments in one of the most influential narrative of the beautiful soul's life, showing why she attempts to live by conscience alone and how as she comes to understand her conscience as the expression of her true individuality.

The narrative of the beautiful soul that this chapter takes as its primary focus is found in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Although there is in Goethe's novel no explicit theorization of conscience, the close reading of the novel I offer here will make it possible to see how the beautiful soul attempts to generate ethical ideals and moral practices out of nothing but her own mind and will. That attempt is understood as an exercise of

conscience by later theorists, including Hegel. My reading of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* will proceed in some detail in order to provide counterbalance to the abstraction of Hegel's representation of the beautiful soul, which is examined in the next chapter. Re-telling these stories of the beautiful soul will make it possible to explore why a theologian like Rowan Williams would claim the beautiful soul represents the temptation of the modern age, and what that temptation has to do with how claims of conscience are made.

The literary career of the beautiful soul

> How recognizable, how familiar to us is the man so beautifully portrayed in the *Grundlegung*, who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy.[172]

In modern moral discourse, the beautiful soul is read as a trope for one who heeds the voice of conscience and acts out of loyalty to her moral or religious conviction, even if that means betraying other loyalties and having to turn away from her family, her station in life, her profession or her country or Christ himself, as Murdoch put it.[173] A beautiful soul is prepared to be at odds with society for disregarding conventional norms; a beautiful soul will stand up for the law that is written on the heart without counting the cost. A beautiful soul directs her life according to her own conception rather than being pushed around by prevailing mores or other external forces. Her life is conceived of as natural and as free– whether free from the playing at socially imposed roles by having cultivated an ironic detachment or free from what others think of her by having the able to retreat to a privileged sphere of interiority. In this vein, the figure of the beautiful soul has come to personify the pacifist and the conscientious objector claiming exemption from military service.[174] But this is to significantly narrow the beautiful soul's original set of associations.

---

[172] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 80.

[173] This is the sense in which beautiful souls are understood in contemporary studies by those such as Eyal Press when he looks at ways in which moral problems play out in the lives of dissidents. Eyal Press, *Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

[174] Jean Bethke Elshtain has examined the trope of the beautiful soul as a figuration of the female non-combatant in terms of women's innocence of and abstention from war with the aim of challenging the cultural

The figure of the beautiful soul has had a long and varied literary career. From its earliest appearances, the beautiful soul denoted an ideal of moral and spiritual beauty. As such the figure of the beautiful soul–or at least the ideal of "beauty of soul"–can be glimpsed in Antique, Medieval, Reformation, Counter-reformation, Pietist and Idealist periods.[175] For instance the ideal of the beautiful soul crops up in Plotinus's treatises on divine contemplation and his discussion of *kalokagathia* in the sixth tractate of the first Enneads.[176] It appears again in the Church Fathers' exegesis of the Song of Songs and meditations on spiritual beauty.[177] The beautiful soul is invoked in the writings of Pietists like Francke and Zinsendorf who insisted on the importance of attaining beauty of soul in the context of becoming a spiritual bride of Christ.[178] Later the idea is taken up by the Earl of Shaftesbury in his explorations of virtuous action, self-formation, conscience and character.[179] In time the figure of the beautiful soul came to embody and in some way synthesize the qualities of goodness and beauty.

Recent historical investigations of the beautiful soul concur that the idea of the beautiful soul was a complex one, drawn from themes found in otherwise discrete realms of discourse.[180] The interplay of these themes has allowed the beautiful soul to take myriad forms in literature and in the lives of those who sought to cultivate their own beautiful souls. That there exists so many variations on the idea of being a beautiful soul and of having 'beauty of soul' has caused speculation that the term is a retrospective labelling of what is a

---

stereotypes that link women with pacifism and showing that the role that women actually play in combat is far more complex. Elsthain shines a light on the dialectic of activity and passivity of women moving through civil society and the state. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). Elshtain's work on the beautiful soul in this context has led to feminist reappraisals of the figure. For one recent example, see Laura Sjoberg, "Women Fighters and the 'Beautiful Soul' Narrative," *International Review of the Red Cross* 92, no. 877 (2010).

[175] Jeffrey S. Librett, "Rhapsodic Dispositions: Engenderments of the Ground in the Discourse of the 'Beautiful Soul' (Shaftesbury, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger)," (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1989), 2.

[176] Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

[177] Bernard Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons on the Song of Songs*, trans. Irene Edmonds (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1980), 206-08. See also Richard A. Norris, *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

[178] Men and women in Pietist communities were guided to write their own confessions in the style of the beautiful soul as a form of spiritual discipline, a practice which reinforced a particular pattern of conversion and spread this understanding of spiritual development through introspection. Ralph W. Buechler, "Germany, Austria, Switzerland: 17th-and 18th-Century Auto/Biography," in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly (London: Routledge, 2013), 365-66.

[179] Lord Shaftesbury, *Shaftesbury: Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[180] See Ralf Konersmann, "Seele, Schöne," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter u. Karlfried Gründer (Basel 1995); Marie Wokalek, *Die Schöne Seele: Eine Denkfigur: Zur Semantik Von Gewissen Und Geschmack Bei Rousseau, Wieland, Schiller, Goethe* (Göttingen: Wallstein 2011), 17-18; Robert Edward Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 7.

rather diffuse phenomenon, especially among those who see the danger of imposing a false uniformity on the array of stories, plays, poems and polemical discussions in which the beautiful soul features.[181]

By the eighteenth century, the beautiful soul had entered into popular currency due in large part to a spike in the publication of belles-lettres across Europe,[182] and having a beautiful soul was held up as an ideal towards which all should strive. A number of influential eighteenth-century thinkers–Goethe, Rousseau, Schlegel, Novalis, Hölderlin and Schiller–offered their own rendition of the beautiful soul story in their novels, letters and reflections on authorship. Their depictions have decisively shaped the way the figure is read now.

For that reason, the beautiful soul may bring to mind the countess who Johann Wolfgang von Goethe popularized in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-6), and her account of the perceptions that had defined her life, as well as the young aristocratic pupil in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's instant best-seller *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761), who poured out her true feelings for her middle-class tutor in a passionate exchange of love letters. Similarly mention of the beautiful soul can evoke the emancipated woman who stands for wholeness and perfection in Friedrich von Schlegel's unfinished romance *Lucinde* (1799), as well as the young maiden Mathilde in Novalis' unfinished fairy tale *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800), with the face reminiscent of the mysterious image glimpsed in the petals of a blue flower. For others, the beautiful soul is personified by the character Diotima in Friedrich Hölderlin's epistolary novel *Hyperion, Or, The Hermit in Greece* (issues in two volumes, which were published in 1797 and 1799). The figure is also personified, more abstractly, by the goddess of beauty with the belt of grace with which Friedrich Schiller begins his essay *On Grace and Dignity* (1793). From the pages of these novels and essays, the beautiful soul emerged as one of the most important concepts in eighteenth-century moral philosophy defining how men and women should live.

In all these texts the beautiful soul refers to an idealized woman or to an abstraction with feminine qualities; however, there are significant gender dynamics at play that make it

[181] This is something Stephenson sees in Norton's treatment of beautiful souls. Roger Stephenson, "Review of Robert E. Norton, Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century,' *Modern Language Review* (2001).
[182] Librett, "Rhapsodic Dispositions: Engenderments of the Ground in the Discourse of the 'Beautiful Soul' (Shaftesbury, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger)," 8.

difficult to determine whether the beautiful soul is a male ideal or a female ideal. One way to understand these dynamics is to view her function in eighteenth century as akin to that of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a stock female character who exists to help the male protagonist achieve happiness by giving his life new meaning.[183] Each beautiful soul in eighteenth century German and French literature attains that designation not because of having intrinsic qualities or independent goals but because of the male gaze which determines that she is who she is.

The gendering of the beautiful soul is also marked by significant inversions that flummox attempts to ascertain for certain whether the beautiful soul is feminine or masculine. For instance the beautiful soul in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, to which this chapter will pay special attention, refers to an unnamed woman but that unnamed woman's status as a beautiful soul is brought into question because in other places in the novel Goethe compares this unnamed woman to her niece who is said to be the true beautiful soul. This niece appears disguised as a man and is described as an Amazon; she is destined to be the wife of Wilhelm the male protagonist and the means by which he finds his true calling and fulfilment. These gender inversions are related to other inversions and diremptions that recur in the beautiful soul's story and to those that mark the treatments of conscience in the work of Goethe, Hegel and Arendt, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

In this thesis, gender pronouns for the beautiful soul follow the cues given by each author. Goethe's beautiful soul is therefore referred to using feminine pronouns and Hegel's beautiful soul is referred to using masculine pronouns. While speaking of the beautiful soul in general the pronouns will be feminine (rather than alternating between the feminine and masculine) to ensure it is clear to whom I am referring.

Today the figure of the beautiful soul serves as a jumping off point for wide-ranging discussions, which are not limited to issues of gender. In contemporary critical discourse the beautiful soul attracts interest as an expression of the moral beauty that might be attained through a self-conscious process of deliberate training and cultivation or *Bildung*,

[183] The term "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" term was coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin. For a good thumbnail sketch of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl see https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ManicPixieDreamGirl

as the Germans called it.[184] In this context the figure of the beautiful soul offers tantalizing hints as to how education in general, and novels in particular, might form us to respond to the complexities of the world.[185] Given the sheer number of beautiful souls who crop up in *Bildungsroman* and the self-conscious nature of that literature, the beautiful soul attracts particular interest as an important trope of modernist literature and authorship.[186]

In other quarters, the figure of the beautiful soul garners attention for helping to formulate the Romantic rejection of Kantian morals and the development of an expressive moral theory for modern society.[187] Where beautiful souls embody different versions of the critique of Kantian moralism, they represent the possibility of human fulfilment in a realm that transcends morality. In this vein, beautiful souls suggest ways of achieving a harmonious unity of the self by overcoming certain separations that divide us against ourselves, such as those between thought and feeling, freedom and nature, duty and inclination or desire and morality. Therefore the beautiful soul is tapped as a conceptual resource with which to examine the problem of self-grounding subjectivity, insofar as it portrays how to work out your rational commitments from within a conception of free, self-determining subjectivity.[188] For the same reason, the beautiful soul is also of interest to those who want examine the moral psychology that emerges when consciousness and identity are formed this way.[189]

---

[184] There does not seem to be a general treatment of the figure of the beautiful soul and *Bildung*, however, there are a number of studies of the cultivation of a beautiful soul as a specifically female ideal, see Mirianne Hirsch, "Spiritual Bildung: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm," in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Mirianne Hirsch Elizabeth Abel, Elizabeth Langland (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983); Laura Deiulio, "The Voice of the *Schöne Seele*," in *Challenging Separate Spheres: Female Bildung in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Germany*, ed. M.E. Goozé (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

[185] This is something I take Jennifer Herdt to be exploring. Jennifer A. Herdt, "Between *Imago Dei* and the *Bildungsroman*: Ethical Formation for Our World," (New Haven: Yale Divinity School, 2009). See also *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming, 2019).

[186] David R. Ellison, *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (London: Clarendon Press, 1997); Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Drew Milne, "The Beautiful Soul: From Hegel to Beckett," *Diacritics* 32, no. 1 (2002).

[187] This is the context in which Charles Taylor and others read the beautiful soul, by focusing on Hegel's use of the figure. See Taylor, *Hegel*; Alan Norrie, *Law and the Beautiful Soul* (London: The Glass House Press, 2005).

[188] Librett, "Rhapsodic Dispositions: Engenderments of the Ground in the Discourse of the 'Beautiful Soul' (Shaftesbury, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger)."

[189] To give just one example: Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).

A trope of conscience and the temptation of the modern age

The present work will focus on the beautiful soul as a critical trope that informs the use of conscience in the secular age. In short, the beautiful soul is one who stakes a claim against existing practices and societal norms on the basis of her conscience. In order to bring the key issues into as sharp a focus as possible, this work will confine itself to the beautiful soul's aspiration to live according to her conscience. What is of interest to us here is that the way a beautiful soul stakes a conscientious position. In making a declaration of conscience she pits herself against the moral expectations and customs of the community. The beautiful soul is characteristically unwilling to share the hopes and concerns that motivate her or the structure of reality she has discerned in reaching that decision. Standing firm, the beautiful soul will not deny her most profound convictions and shuns any society that might compel her to do so. But she knows that she cannot justify her position. She is caught between what she takes as the definitive ground for holding certain beliefs or taking certain actions and what counts as an authoritative reason for doing so.

Faced with this conundrum, she withdraws from the controversy that her actions have created, conceiving of her decisions as a matter of individual interest and self-determination. For a beautiful soul, decisions of conscience–including the aims and ideals that inform them–cannot be explained or justified. Thus, a beautiful soul's decisions have a certain finality to them, which seems to set them beyond dispute. Since her decisions remain inaccessible and inexplicable to others, the beautiful soul can be held accountable to no one else.

In staking a position on a disputed matter, a beautiful soul is not engaging in any kind of process that might address the wrong she has taken a stand against. She does not aspire to improve conditions in her society or to make the changes that would eradicate the wrong. She merely seeks to obtain a personal exemption in order to avoid the taint of the wrong and thereby maintain her own moral standing and sense of integrity. For that reason, Rowan Williams has described the figure as one who witnesses to the temptation of the modern age: to withdraw from properly public tasks into the private cultivation of a beautiful soul.[190]

[190] Williams is particularly interested in what some of Gillian Rose's discussions of the beautiful soul can tell us about the metaphysical dimension of political life. He wants to suggest ways in which metaphysics might

To see why this is so and what it might tell us about conscience in this age it is necessary first to fill in some more of the beautiful soul's backstory. One of the most influential depictions of the beautiful soul is found in book six of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Book six is entitled "Confessions of a beautiful soul." It is a curious narrative which forms a story within the story. "Confessions of a beautiful soul" is thought to have been lifted directly from the personal papers of Susanna Katharine von Klettenberg, who was a friend of Goethe's family and a devout Pietist.[191] Book six is odd in that it represents a complete break in the narrative and a switch in voice from third person to first person. It also mixes realistic and idealized characters and treats those character with both irony and earnestness admiration. Despite these curiosities, Goethe's portrayal of the figure of the beautiful soul so captured and enamored readers that "Confessions of a beautiful soul" was treasured even by those who would have been happy to see the rest of the book consigned to the flames.[192]

Goethe's depiction of the beautiful soul in book six became a touchstone for romantic writers who took up the trope later.[193] For my purposes, Goethe's rendition of the beautiful soul story is particularly helpful in that it furnishes some sense of the fictional world the beautiful soul occupied in the eighteenth century and details what such a life might look like. Setting out the details of this story in its particulars will provide the framework for reading Hegel's critical characterization of the beautiful soul with all its abstractions, in the next chapter.

---

lay bare the underlying structure of our political commitments and show what constitutes those commitments as more than arbitrarily willed options. Rowan D. Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995): 11.

[191] Apparently Goethe was given von Klettenberg's confessions to read when he was bedridden and after a haemorrhage. Jane Veronica Curran, *Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship: A Reader's Commentary* (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), 224. Goethe encountered a number of living beautiful souls in addition to Susanna Katharina von Klettenberg, whose confessions, lightly edited, formed the substance of Confessions in *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*. Among them are Rahel Varnhagen (née Levin), who hosted a famous Berlin salon in the 1800s, and Charlotte von Stein, who inspired him to write a drama about the life of a beautiful soul, *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1779).

[192] Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age. Vol. 2, Revolution and Renunciation, 1790-1803* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 341-2.

[193] Novalis and Schlegel explicitly define their own projects over and against Goethe's and cannot overstate the influence Wilhelm Meister holds over them.

The beautiful soul in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*

Almost all the key features of the life of a beautiful soul can be distilled from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96) in its final version. This section will look at Goethe's narration of the story of the beautiful soul in some detail after situating it within the novel as a whole. I will recount how the beautiful soul determined to shape her life so that it would be an expression of her true individuality. In what follows, I will pay special attention to how she went about fulfilling her aspiration to construct a beautiful, dignified, harmonious moral existence, what came of her rejection of social life and what that cost her.

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship is the story of Wilhelm, a young man unsure of what to do with his life who decides to strike off on a journey of self-discovery. His wanderings lead him from his father's world of double-bookkeeping, speculation and profit and into the world of the theatre. In searching out his true calling, Wilhelm takes up a vagabond existence with a troupe of actors and dreams of becoming a great actor himself. He has ambitions to establish a National Theatre through which he might play a role in transforming the lives of his contemporaries through staged productions that would appeal to the masses. He wonders whether he might become a second Shakespeare.

Wilhelm wants to discern the meaning of his life. He aspires to learn how to live rightly, according to his inner nature. He wants to discover the law of his being, that is, a relationship with the external world around him that fits the essence of his inmost needs and inclinations. "Let me put it quite succinctly," he tells his friend Werner as he turns down a job in commerce, "even as a youth I had the vague desire and intention to develop myself fully, myself as I am. I still have the same intention."[194]

Wilhelm's coming of age story epitomizes the *Bildungsroman* form in European literature.[195] *Bildungsroman* narrates a young person's education or, better, formation, as he or she grows into maturity. These stories of great expectations and lost illusions depict the young protagonist making his way in a world undergoing sweeping changes. Historically, *Bildungsroman* is seen as a product of social upheaval, especially as traditional societies

[194] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Eric A. Blackall, and Victor Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 174.
[195] *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* has been identified with *Bildungsroman* ever since Karl Morgenstern introduced the term in a lecture he gave in 1819. Wilhelm Dilthy lifted up *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as the prototype of the genre in his work *Leben Schleiermachers* (1870).

underwent political and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth centuries.[196] It narrates not only the opportunities and crises of its young protagonists as they come of age, but also the opportunities and crises of modernity as it comes of age.[197]

During this process of formation, the young protagonist comes to understand who he is by gaining self-knowledge or a self-image (where *Bild* refers to "image"). Going through formation includes learning for himself how the world works. It also involves finding and following his true course. For the protagonist to make his way in the world, he must use the materials he has been given–his innate impulses and circumstances; however, he is free to choose how to arrange and order his life much as an artist uses creativity to work with the materials to hand.

The apprenticeship Wilhelm determines to undertake, to which the title refers, is in the art of living a good life. Although he is apprenticed to no one master-craftsman, Wilhelm meets a number of people who are also experimenting with various ways of ordering their own lives and who succeed to differing degrees in developing their potential. At a critical juncture in the narrative one of Wilhelm's friends, an actress named Aurelia, becomes seriously ill and a physician advises her to look at a manuscript whose contents would provide palliative care while she is dying. The manuscript is entitled "Confessions of a beautiful soul" and Wilhelm reads it to Aurelia.

After Aurelia dies and Wilhelm departs from the theatre company to set off into an uncertain future, there is a break in the narrative into which Goethe has inserted the full text of the physician's manuscript, which comprises the whole of book six. This manuscript has an enormous influence on Wilhelm and shows him an attractive though also troubling form of existence. It leaves him wondering whether cultivating a beautiful soul might allow him to fulfil his potential amidst the social and material constraints of the world in which he lives.

---

[196] For a sample of the debate about how *Bildungsroman* should be defined, what other books ought to be included, and which features best characterized the genre, see Michael Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity: Studies in the Bildungsroman from Wieland to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).
[197] Franco Moretti and Albert Sbragia, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000).

In the "Confessions of a beautiful soul" an unnamed woman offers an account of the successive stages of her spiritual development.[198] She describes how her beliefs were challenged and deepened and how they shaped the course of her life. The life she pursues is marked by solitude and introspection. Storybooks, a wonder-cabinet full of natural objects, and fairy tales sustain her imagination during the long bouts of illness that marked her childhood. When she outgrows dolls, her great longing is for a pet lamb that might be turned–with nurture and love–into an enchanted prince and ask for her hand in marriage. All that she reads and imagines serves to awaken in her a latent "inclination for the Invisible." Whatever the calling she was destined to follow, "God was to becomes my closest friend–that was certain."[199]

There are striking differences between Book six and the rest of the novel, and between the maturation of the beautiful soul and of Wilhelm. Wilhelm's story is about adventures, surprise encounters and the guiding hand of secret societies that direct him along the path of recognizing and perhaps realizing his aspirations in life, whereas the beautiful soul's story is about contemplation and introspection, about attending to inner thoughts and secret feelings to find one's own interior guide. Wilhelm's journey across the countryside, which takes him on and off theatre stages, and in and out of the arms of various lovers, is here contrasted with the beautiful soul's journey within, as she discovers the strength of her convictions and learns to follow her conscience.

The process of formation that both the beautiful soul and Wilhelm undertake entails cultivating their innate potential by engaging selectively with the world around them. This conception of *Bildung* represents a reworking of earlier conceptions of *Bildung*, that can be found in the writings of Pietists, of Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics, and of Luther, where *Bildung* is conceived of formation in terms of God's creation of humans in the image of God and of God's restoration of this image through Christ. In earlier, more explicitly theological conceptions of *Bildung*, this process was culminated in a resemblance to God. The formation that Wilhelm and the beautiful soul undertake (in their separate ways) is supposed to culminate in a harmonious, unified existence that is unique to each. This reworking of *Bildung* points to the secularization of Pietist and mystical conceptions, or

---

[199] Goethe, Blackall, and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 218.

as Jennifer Herdt posits, to the emergence of new religious options of the sort Charles Taylor saw proliferating in *A Secular Age*.[200]

When Wilhelm opens the manuscript he has been given and begins to read "Confessions of a beautiful soul," he is quickly drawn into the story of this young woman's life. She addresses her readers in this way:

> When I had just turned eight, I had a hemorrhage, and from that moment on I was all feeling and memory. Every little detail of what happened then is as present to me now as if it had occurred only yesterday. During the nine months of convalescence which I bore patiently, the foundations of my present way of thinking were laid–or it seems to me now. For during that time my mind received various impulses that helped in the shaping of a specific character. I suffered and I loved–that was the rhythm of my heart. During my sharp spells of coughing and debilitating fever I kept very quiet, like a snail withdrawn into its shell.... Anyone who came and sat on my bed had to tell me a story. From my mother I liked to hear biblical stories, and my father entertained me with objects of nature.... [M]y aunt told me love tales and fairy stories. I absorbed everything, and it all took root. I had moments when I intimately communed with the Invisible Being, and I can still remember some verses which I dictated to my mother at the time.[201]

In her manuscript, the young woman explains that as she grew she was able to enjoy better health, more learning, and a steady stream of balls, plays and court appearances, which slowly crowded out her thoughts and feelings towards the Invisible One. While attending a ball she befriended two brothers who charmed her, the oldest of which endured poor health too and in whom she thought she had found the beloved lamb for which she had been yearning. Over time they drifted apart because of the teasing of the younger brother and she learns later that both brothers had passed away. At another ball she became acquainted with a young man whose ambition was to gain a diplomatic position at court. They fell into a conversation that evening which they resumed the next. She nicknamed him Narcissus and teased him about his self-satisfied manner; he lent her books that appealed to her interests.

One night at a party during a game of forfeits a fight erupted, and a drunken guest drew his sword and attacked Narcissus in a fit of jealousy. While the rest of the company restrained the attacker, Narcissus was led into another room. When the young woman

[200] Herdt, "Between *Imago Dei* and the *Bildungsroman*: Ethical Formation for Our World."
[201] Goethe, Blackall, and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 217.

realizes that Narcissus has in fact received serious wounds to his head and hand, she insists that a doctor is called, and tends to Narcissus injuries until the arrival of the doctor. Whatever occurred between them while waiting for the doctor's arrival changed the way they felt for one another. When Narcissus returned to health some months later, the two became secretly engaged with an aim to marrying as soon as Narcissus had secured a position at court.

She confesses that by this point in her life she felt quite estranged from God, having thought of her Invisible Friend only now and then over the previous three years. A sense of gratitude for her fiancé's return to health brings her attention back to God. She begins to reacquaint herself with God first by paying "little ceremonial visits" out of duty and then gradually praying more frequently as she finds a way of expressing her thoughts to God. Narcissus does not share the feelings she has for God. When a position at court opened for which Narcissus was eligible and was given to a competitor, she rushed to her room, locked the door and burst into tears. Her tears subsided at the point in which she decides that this could not have happened just by chance. She holds firm to the belief that this disappointment would be turned right somehow and that it could be endured with the help she received in prayer from her Invisible Friend.

The young woman admits that while she approaches God, she did not always do so in the right spirit. Sometimes she was greatly soothed by prayer and other times she felt like "someone wishing to warm himself in the sun when the shadow obstructs him."[202] It seems as if the feelings of consolation and pleasure she receives in prayer are in some way hindered by the pleasures and activities of her social circle. She tries to observe what is going on inside her and to think about how that relates to the world around her of which she is a part. She comes to the uncomfortable conclusion that her favorite pleasures and pastimes–dancing, card playing and so forth–were not for her harmless diversions that she could engage with indifferently. These superficial pursuits leave her feeling conflicted and out of sorts with herself. Moreover, they are activities that she took part in more to please Narcissus than herself anyway. There is a growing sense of awareness that she can no longer live for pleasures and a realization that she will never find happiness this way. One consideration holds her back: she fears that abstaining will embarrassing Narcissus given

[202] Ibid., 229.

how sensitive he is to her appearing moralistic. Only after confronting her fear of offending him and her fear of losing the esteem of others, does she realize that she was in fact free to decide her own happiness and to follow her conscience come what may.

She resolves from henceforth to live according to the dictates of her heart and not to accept pressure from others to do anything that was morally unsuitable to her. Her desire is for complete freedom to act in accordance with her convictions. When Narcissus obtains a position at court and requests her hand in marriage on the condition that she changes her way of thinking to match his, she turns him down. She records that "I thanked him politely and tore my heart and mind away from the whole affair, with the same eagerness as one leaves a theatre after the final curtain has been lowered."[203]

When the young woman breaks off her engagement to Narcissus, she regains peace of mind. Her longing for romance–for an enchanted prince to whom she might be betrothed–is replaced by an earlier longing, a desire to live in union with something, someone Invisible. The pet lamb is set free so she can recommence in her search for the lamb of God. Engaging in self-examination, a practice she nurtures in private prayer, helps her to respond to the growing awareness of these inclinations and to begin to structure a more authentic existence that might accord with her nature. In solitude she can hear the voice of conscience and interpret it, but to freely follow it she must take steps to disentangle herself from any restrictions that could be imposed by romantic attachments or societal expectations. This she does, as she feels that there is no longer any need to hide her piety now. The young woman finds a small circle of new friends among the nobility and to win tolerance, if not respect, for her sentiments. "My story had become common knowledge, and there were many persons curious to meet a girl who valued God more than her betrothed."[204]

A stepbrother of her father's who she calls "Uncle" secures her the position of canoness, a Lutheran lay order, and offers to arrange a marriage for her younger sister. When her sister becomes a lady-in-waiting at a neighboring court, she accompanies her re-entering society. The canoness writes that she took to every aspect of court life; she talked to everybody, profited from the people she encountered, fell into the pattern of social duties required of her and met women who were models of all the virtues. Only upon her arrival back home

[203] Ibid., 232.
[204] Ibid., 233.

did she suffer another hemorrhage, which left her weak for some time. She decides to renounce court life out of a conviction that she would never find in society what she was seeking.

This decision gave her peace, although life at home presented its own trials. Both her mother and father became ill and nursing them tested her poor physical stamina and her faith in her chosen path. Turning her thoughts over and over, she mulled over whether she truly acted in good conscience or whether she had only been imitating others. Was her heart's refuge in God real? God's presence returned as a constant comfort to her, but increasingly so did some troubling thoughts: To what extent did these experiences mirror the experiences of others? Could she be completely reliant on her own powers of thought without referring to others and without measuring her experiences by other systems of thought? The canoness resolves to consult the theological writings of the Pietists at Halle but balks at their image of a wrathful God. She admits to having no concept of sin or fear of death and rejects the teachings from Halle, determining that to live with a clear conscience would mean for her not relying on any such supposed authority to guide her in the future. The canoness gives the following account of her spiritual life at this stage:

> I can vouch that I never returned empty-handed when I went to God in distress and anxiety. That is claiming a lot, but I cannot, I dare not try to be more explicit.... I was constantly in His presence. That is what I can declare as the ultimate truth and can do so without resorting to the language of theological systems. How I wished that I could have lived without recourse to such systems. But who can so early reach a state of complete blissful absorption in his own self without reference to external forms and systems? I was seriously concerned about my external salvation, and humbly placed my trust in the experience and repute of others. I applied myself thoroughly to the system of achieving conversion advocated by the pietist theologians at Halle, but I could not adapt myself to it at all.... My decision to extricate myself in spiritual matters from the influences and advice of my friends resulted in my acquiring the courage to pursue my own course in external relationships.[205]

The canoness explains that she would have remained at this stage of development, preferring to withdraw into solitude, if she had not met and befriended someone. She calls him Philo and tells us that he had been of service to her aging father and that he was much like Narcissus only with the advantage of a religious education. He shares with her the

[205] Ibid., 236-7.

circumstances of people she only knew by sight and over time confides some rather difficult circumstances in his own private relations. His story reminds her of the hero of Wieland's novel Agathon, who was educated by Delphic priests but whose education was derailed by temptations of the flesh. Piecing together his story of seduction, she realizes that she too might have found herself in such difficult circumstances given her vow of celibacy and for the first time her own capacity for sin becomes "terrifyingly clear and conceivable."[206]

This discovery leads the canoness to question how a person is supposed to rid herself of such feelings of guilt: Is sin an inescapable human weakness? Can it be overcome with virtuous acts or with friendship with God or should we simply make a virtue of our instincts? How does one obtain purity of heart? Turning to scripture for an answer, she comes to learn something of the mystery of the Incarnation:

> What I was seeking was to be found in the mystery of the Incarnation through which the Word, in which we and all things are made, becomes flesh. It was revealed to me in darkling distance that our ultimate maker once descended to the depths in which we travail, penetrating and absorbing them, passed through every stage of our human condition from conception and birth to the grace, and, emerging from this strange detour, rose once again to those clear bright heights where we too much dwell in order to gain happiness.... And He became like us to that we might be a part of Him.[207]

With her head in her hands, she prayed earnestly for the faith not merely to accept the Incarnation but to experience its reality and effect. At that moment, a strong pull, which she describes as something like the impulse that carries one towards an absent friend, drew her soul to the crucified Christ and showed her what faith is. She laments that neither words nor images can capture such feelings, but that she had been freed from the physical world: "I had taken on wings. I could now rise above all that had threatened me before, like a bird effortlessly soaring with joyful song above a raging torrent, beside which a dog remains standing, barking anxiously."[208] In that moment, she sensed she had found what she had been seeking all her life: the true form of her being. She felt her soul was able to leave behind embodied existence, and yet attached to something definite. After that she continued to listen to sermons which might supplement her private devotional practices,

[206] Ibid., 238.
[207] Ibid., 239.
[208] Ibid., 240.

but increasingly she feels as if the preachers were "gnawing away at shells, whereas I was enjoying the kernels."[209]

Here the canoness confides that her spiritual life took a lamentable detour. Philo's parents had connections with the pietistic community at Herrnhut and had many writings by its founder Count Zinzendorf in his library. She had dismissed all this as heresy but one day lacking anything else to read, she picked up the Moravian hymnal. She felt at once that they aligned with her way of thinking. Further reading won her over to Zinzendorf's way of thinking. If ill health had not made even venturing into her own garden an ordeal, she might have gone and joined him. Instead, she became a Herrnhut sister in her own way. The canoness explains that she did not disclose her Pietistic sympathies to her spiritual director, the court preacher, because he had been opposed to another courtier's conversion to Pietism. But she did become acquainted with a worshipping community connected with Herrnhut that met clandestinely. While she enjoyed their fellowship, especially hearing their testimonies and sharing those things she had "worked out for myself and within myself," this community proved a disappointment, as it seemed to her that few of them understood the higher things to which their words and expressions groped. When the court preacher discovered what his parishioners were getting up to there was uproar at court and in the town. The canoness would not take sides against the court preacher, partly out of respect for him, but mostly out of a disinclination to engage in doctrinal discussions which might unsettle her. In any case, the row ended when the court preacher died suddenly.

In my reading of the "Confessions," the beautiful soul's efforts to cultivate her moral and spiritual life have led her to disentangle herself from the bonds of marriage, courtly life, and religious community. Each of these forms of institutional life disappointed her, for in each she felt some expectation that her way of thinking come into some conformity with that of others. Her chosen path is to rely on conscience alone as authoritative. As that path can be walked without having to venture beyond her own garden, she grows more self-assured about working out a form of life that harmonizes with her inner nature.

In order to be guided only by her inner nature, she renounces any social relations, obligations or circumstances she cannot tolerate. But this is not simply a story of one

[209] Ibid.

woman's renunciation of the social, religious and cultural institutions that would confine her. On the reading I am offering here, she does not dispense with the features of her external world that cannot be harmonize with her internal world. She internalizes them. In other words, she makes what is other to her–her own. For instance, after renouncing her fiancé's offer of marriage, married life is internalized to the extent that it generates spousal devotion to her Invisible friend, the lamb who was slain. Next after renouncing her place at the court, courtly life is internalized until it generates the sentiments of nobility within her interior castle. Then once she stops sharing in the worshipping life of the Pietists, she internalizes the life of a Herrnhut sister until it inverts and manifests as piety that flourishes in secret seclusion. If her story is read as a story of renunciation, then these inversions are missed and are their connection to the diremptions in Hegel's treatment of the beautiful souls and in Rose's that will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Returning to her "Confessions," it is clear that these acts of renunciation and internalization bring some order, harmony and beauty into her life. And as her confidence about following only the dictates of her own conscience grows, the canoness becomes increasingly unwilling to rely on others to confirm or correct her conclusions, retreating further into her own world of private judgment.

In the course of events, the canoness' uncle finds a suitor for her younger sister and invites them to his castle where the wedding was to take place. The castle seems a world of its own to the canoness. She comments on its grandeur and cultured tastefulness, its dignity and harmoniousness. She is surprised to find that the unfussy magnificence of the space and of the wedding arrangements elicits from her a sense of calm and composure. In short, the castle, the wedding ceremony and the banquet are enormously pleasing to her to the extent that they reinforce the ideals of taste, dignity and harmony that she is trying to unite in the way she lives her life.

On this occasion, the canoness' uncle makes a special effort to speak with her, particularly on the subject of moral cultivation. Although he does not share her religious convictions, he tells her that he holds in high estimation her sense of mission and purpose. He believes her aim is to come to terms with her moral nature and that pursuing this aim necessitated the sacrifices she made. He concedes that if she had adapted herself to her family or to a husband, she would have been in continual conflict with herself and never would have

known peace. There is in his conversation more than a hint that the way she pursued her purpose impressed him more than her chosen way of life.

As they talk, her uncle directs her attention to certain paintings hanging on the wall and describes the artists who made them, the spirit of their works, their techniques and the distinct places each holds in the history of art. Still the canoness can only see the paintings in terms that relate to moral instruction or her own moral perfection. He notices her inability to appreciate the artistry of these paintings–or any other qualities apart from their ability to move her or improve her–and warns her about developing proper perspective so that she does not make determinations according to her own standards only. He tries to tell her that self-cultivation is only profitable when one is actually learning something or actively engaged in some way, and he advises her not to pursue the cultivation of her moral life in isolation and seclusion.

She does not take his advice to heart. As she prepared to depart from his castle, her uncle presents her with the cross of her order with a large diamond suspended from it, perhaps representing a token of reconciliation. She was also treated to another concert performed by the wedding choir, whose harmonies, so unlike the hymns she was used to, seemed capable of "speaking to the very best in us and making us fully aware of our godlikeness."[210]

Once she had settled back into life at home, her uncle attempted to draw her out by loaning paintings to her and other works of fine art that might prompt reflection. But the affairs of her heart and soul preoccupied her and she could attend to a work of art only for a short time before being drawn back into her own preoccupations. There were other concerns to distract her as well: her unmarried sister caught pneumonia and died, her newly married sister admitted of some marital difficulties and had a miscarriage, and her father developed fever and died. She notes that dealing with these realities gave her the chance to think about the things that until that point she had only sung about in hymns.

After her father died, the canoness tries to renew old friendships. She even gets reacquainted with some members of the Herrnhut community for a time but does not find in their meetings what she hoped for and eventually breaks off with them again. Despite

[210] Goethe, Blackall, and Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 250.

years of poor health, she records that she does not fear death; however, she feels she ought to use her remaining time to examine her soul and bring herself closer to God. Often times she felt as if her soul was separable from her body; and a physician she met at her sister's wedding warns her that "such feelings, if nurtured without reference to external things, will drain us dry and undermine our existence. "Man's first task," he explained, "is to be active, and one should use those intervals when one is obliged to rest, to acquire a clear knowledge of external things, for that will assist us in all our further activity."[211] He asks her to think not just on the ills of the body and of all whom she had nursed but also on the objects of creation all around her. She disregards the doctor's advice about becoming more active, but claims that she does learn how to perceive God in Nature as well as in her own heart, thanks to him.

Sick and weak as she was, the canoness outlived her brother-in-law, who died in a riding accident, and your younger sister, who died shortly after bearing a fourth child. The canoness feels that there is little she can do for her orphaned nieces and nephews, given her infirmity, and is relieved when her uncle decides to devote himself to their upbringing. She has reservations about the unconventional way in which he is educating them to follow their inclinations and is pained that he treats her as a detrimental influence on them. Her delight is in her eldest niece Natalie who looks most like her and whose moral instincts "put her to shame." She explains,

> one could not imagine a more noble presence, a more peaceful disposition, a greater evenness of attention to every kind of goal or object.... I must confess that I myself never had the ability to make an occupation out of works of charity. I was not parsimonious in my gifts to the poor, and often gave more than I should have in my circumstances, but in a way I was buying myself off.... But with my niece it was just the opposite, and I admired her for this.[212]

Still it pains her that the children's upbringing deprives them of anything that would "lead to their communing with themselves and with their Invisible, and only true Friend." [213]

"Confessions of a beautiful soul" concludes with a reassertion of her intention to continually strive after the true form of her being, experienced as a perfect union with the divine, and

[211] Ibid., 253.
[212] Ibid., 254.
[213] Ibid., 255.

a final affirmation that she will be guided from within by her own impulses alone. These are her last words:

> I am always moving forward and never backward, since my actions are always drawing nearer and nearer to the idea of perfection which I have worked out for myself, and I find it easier every day to do what I think is right, despite my bodily infirmity that restricts me so much–is this accountable solely to human nature, whose corruption I have become so profoundly aware of? Not for me, at least. I cannot recall having followed any commandment that loomed before me as a law imposed from without: I was always led and guided by impulse, freely following my own persuasion, and experiencing neither restriction nor regrets. Thanks be to God that I am fully aware to whom I owe my happiness and can accept my good fortune in humility.[214]

Here the story of the beautiful soul comes to an end and Wilhelm's story resumes. Wilhelm has been told by the physician that the "Confessions" were meant to relive the distress of his dying friend Aurelia. Later he will come to understand that the story of this beautiful soul was also intended as an object lesson for him about the dangers of adopting this model of self-formation, though not before attempting to renounce his past and find a more inward existence.

Along the way, he will meet in person Natalie, the niece of the beautiful soul mentioned in the manuscript, and the woman he has been searching for (consciously or unconsciously). Natalie lives out a purer form of individuality and a more complete *Bildung*. She endeavors to show Wilhelm how to view himself and the world around him more objectively. With her help and the help of members of a secret society, who help him reflect on his past actions and reconcile the polarities within his personal experiences, Wilhelm becomes more conscious of the true contours of his own individuality and the true nature of the world.

In this coming of age novel, individual's self-identity is disclosed and developed through acting in the world and reflecting on those actions. Wilhelm will not complete his own education by the end of the novel, but he will have begun to understand that forming his identity depends upon direct and sustained involvement with the world around him. As one reader put it, Wilhelm will have learned that "his identity is not just the unfolding of some innate form but an active interplay between his specific nature and a specific world, and that the proper language of this mode of selfhood is not just the personal confessions of his

[214] Ibid., 255-6.

past actions but a commonly defined and accepted language arising from a series of mutual confessions."[215]

The beautiful soul's inner life and the life of conscience

My reading of Goethe's "Confessions" has shown how, over the course of a lifetime, the beautiful soul tried to work out what was right for her based on what was in line with her innermost convictions. In pouring over her past and trying to understand it, she relived those times that she betrayed her conscience, whether by conforming to the expectations of others or accepting pressure to do anything that did not suit her. She aspired to an authentic existence. As she came to view it, being true to herself was possible only if she acted solely through the strength of her own pure convictions, without reference to other authorities or recourse to ethical theories and principles. For that reason, she was always trying to apprehend what was not herself in relation to her own self and to ensure that the motives for her actions came only from within.

She poured all of her energy into cultivating her soul and creating something morally beautiful of her life. She structured her daily existence according to the demands of her inner form. Her confessions detail how she gained understanding of her proper inner form and knowledge of her deepest personal convictions through self-reflection. To better hear the voice of conscience, she shut out all other competing voices and shut out any relation that might have disquieted her. She sought complete freedom to act according to what she alone had heard.

Renouncing social ties seemed to bring direction, order, harmony and even beauty into a life which otherwise would be lost in a bewildering array of competing desires. As she understood it, renunciation intensified the specific form of her identity and helped to unify her personality. On my reading, those renunciations do not actually allow her to dispense with the external realities she wishes to be free from (the institutions of marriage, religion, courtly life and so on). Instead they cause her to internalize them, re-instating them in her inner life.

[215] Benjamin C. Sax, "Active Individuality and the Language of Confession: The Figure of the Beautiful Soul in the *Lehrjahre* and the *Phänomenologie*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (1983): 449.

What is more, the harmony she believes she has achieved in her efforts to construct a coherent existence based only on the true form of her heart has come at a cost. And it costs her the world. For the canoness, pursuing her true love involved rejecting every inclination that could have drawn her out of herself and into the world. Cultivating a beautiful soul meant giving her life a harmonious and authentic form, a form that could only emerge from within; therefore, it seemed crucial that there be no moral or religious constraints upon any of her actions. Accomplishing this required cutting herself free every relationship of responsibility or obligation and from all bonds of solidarity. In following her conscience, the beautiful soul distanced herself from her fiancé, her friends, her fellow courtiers, her religious communities, and the needs of the poor on the other side of her walled garden. She involved herself in community life only when doing so might strengthen her to live according to her own will.

On this reading, it is now possible to see how the beautiful soul of the "Confessions" depicts one response to having weak moral sources, which is to turn away from the needs of the world and the demands of universal benevolence, and to focus on smaller, more achievable goals.[216] In this case, the young woman feels she does not have the motivation or health or character to undertake acts of solidarity or combat injustice. For that reason, she concentrates on self-fulfillment rather than on the demands of the courts, society, religious community or nature. She is absorbed in the task of constructing a life for herself that is internally consistent, unified, beautiful. She identifies that life with the life of conscience. To maintain a certain consistency with herself implied by the life of conscience, Goethe's beautiful soul aspires to draw upon only moral sources that can be found within and she does that by systematically extricating herself from all external influences and constraints. She side-lines or suppresses the external factors that condition her possibilities. And she shuts out every demand that does not come from within, courting triviality and insignificance, as her uncle might have wished to say, and, undermining any actual, meaningful existence in the world, as the physician warned. In so doing, the figure of the beautiful soul shows us what it looks like to try to generate ethical ideals and moral practices with nothing but one's own mind and will.

[216] "Perhaps, after all, it's safer to have small goals rather than great [ones]." Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 21.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the beautiful soul's role in literature and theory before exploring the beautiful soul as a trope of conscience. It argued that the beautiful soul offers a depiction of how we might respond to having weak moral sources, namely, by relying only moral ideal and principles generated by one's own mind and will. In order to show how the beautiful soul does this, Goethe's narrative was re-told so as to draw out why the beautiful retreats from society and from any source of conflict that might prevent her from being in tune with herself. It permitted us to see why she made it her goal to live by conscience alone, as an expression of her true individuality. It also permitted us to see that whenever she renounced institutions of social, cultural and political life, in the hopes that withdrawing would free her to work on her own inner life without interference, those institutions inverted and became interiorized. Finally, the reading of "Confessions of a beautiful soul" offered here made it possible to see why Rowan Williams holds that cultivating a beautiful soul is a temptation in the modern age.

IV

The cautionary tale of the beautiful soul

Introduction

If the prospect of cultivating a beautiful soul still seemed like an attractive option, Georg Wilhelm Hegel's critical characterization of the figure offers a word of caution. Hegel's portrayal of the beautiful soul in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is definitive, because it constitutes a re-reading of the entire tradition of writing on the beautiful soul.[217] Hegel considered the beautiful soul in several different contexts;[218] however, his most extensive treatment of the beautiful soul is found in the sixth chapter of *Phenomenology of Spirit* in a section on morality entitled "Conscience. The 'beautiful soul', evil and its forgiveness."[219] Here Hegel's analysis of moral knowledge culminates in a discussion of a conscientious attitude Hegel terms "Spirit that is certain of itself." In that pivotal section, he lays out the pitfalls associated with adopting this kind of moral stance.[220]

This chapter considers that pivotal section closely in order to show why Hegel interrogates

---

[217] Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. S.Cherniak and J. Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 515.

[218] The beautiful figures briefly in *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel refers back to his account in the *Phenomenology*, claiming that there he showed how "what has been called a 'beautiful soul,' that sill nobler type of subjectivism which empties the objective of all content and so fades away until it loses all actuality, is a variation of subjectivism like other forms of the same phenomenon." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A.W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 182.§ 140. Hegel identifies Jesus with the beautiful soul in his piece "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate." There Jesus is viewed as teaching the doctrine of love, prioritizing purity or impurity of the heart, the subjective over bondage and command, overcoming alienation from nature through an understanding of others in all their limitations. "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, ed. T. M. Knox and R. Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

[219] *Phenomenology of Spirit* 383-409. References to parts of the *Phenomenology* are by means of A.V. Miller's paragraph numbers.

[220] While I am suggesting that this section of the *Phenomenology* functions like a morality tale, it would be wrong to conclude that the work as a whole does not have other functions, namely, as a phenomenology of consciousness. While it is helpful to describe the narrative shape of *Phenomenology* at crucial points (where, for instance, it reads like a tragedy, a comedy, a modern Socratic dialogue, *Bildungsroman* or a series of recollections), it does not follow that *Phenomenology* is best read solely *as literature*, if reading it as literature means failing to appreciate the work's philosophical aims and ambitions. For an exploration of Hegel's appropriation of various narrative forms and how those forms advance Hegel's philosophical project in *Phenomenology* see Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). As for reading *Phenomenology* as philosophy, Hegelian scholarship still runs along deep divisions over the nature of Hegel's philosophical project and whether a metaphysical reading (Charles Taylor, Michael Rosen), non-metaphysical reading (Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, Robert Brandom, John McDowell) or a revised conceptual realist metaphysical reading of *Phenomenology* (Stephen Houlgate, Kenneth Westphall, Frederick Beiser) is most appropriate.

individuality as a justified norm. It looks first at the Kantian context of Hegel's writing on conscience and second at how Hegel sets up this cautionary tale as an internal dialogue. Then each of the protagonist's discoveries about living according to conscience are re-narrated. This reading of Hegel's narrative will focus on how living according to conscience can lead to cultivating a beautiful soul, and why cultivating a beautiful soul can be understood as a way of framing a particular matter as a moral issue in instances when one is unable or unwilling to engage with it as a political issue. My reading will clarify why Hegel believed the project of cultivating a beautiful soul to be futile and self-defeating. In opening up this second cautionary tale about the conscience of the beautiful soul, I argue that here in Hegel we discover how to avoid the fate of the beautiful soul.

Hegel's conscience in its Kantian context

Hegel's concerns about acting according to conscience and becoming a beautiful soul require some contextualization. For instance, Hegel's discussions of conscience depend upon the etymological associations of the German word *Gewissen*, a word that means "sure" and that emphasizes certainty.[221] Reading Hegel's morality tale also requires that we keep key elements of conscience's conceptual and social framework in view. Here I follow Terry Pinkard's work on Hegel, which will be the focus of what I have to say about the social and conceptual context of Hegelian conscience.

Hegel sets his exploration of conscience in the context of the eighteenth century reaction against Kantian moral theory. The "Moral World-View" of Kant was perceived as an anti-sentimental ethic of pure duty, because it separated two elements of moral action: duty and inclination. A morally significant act is the expression of duty done for duty's sake and is, as such, universal. Moral consciousness is the consciousness of universal duty; it is not the consciousness of one's own particular inclinations or feelings of obligation. There is no scope in this account for particular agents and their own inclinations.

To the extent that Kantian moral theory separated the universal and particular elements of moral experience and excluding the inclinations peculiar to the individual agent, it was

[221] Karen S. Feldman, *Binding Words: Conscience and Rhetoric in Hobbes, Hegel, and Heidegger* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 53. Henry S. Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 459.

thought to provide an inadequate account of the relation between duties and inclinations in ethical deliberation.[222] Duty for duty's sake was seen as too much of an abstraction to be an accurate character of moral action. Our ethical deliberation is never between willing pure duty and following mere inclination. In most cases, it is not simply a matter of pure duty because any number of opposing courses of action could qualify as one's duty. Nor is it simply a matter of mere inclination, because in most cases the action is commanded by the array of moral commitments in which the agent finds himself.

Fichte and others extolled conscience as offering up an alternative: the consciousness of a romantic individual.[223] This was a type of moral consciousness that acknowledged the uniqueness of the individual and brought deeply held subjective feelings into play in the pursuit of the moral life and in the making of ethical decisions. Whereas Kantian moral theory held that one could only be free by assuming a detached impartial standpoint, the romantics held that the ground for a truly free and non-alienated life was to be found within, by exploring one's own subjectivity. As Pinkard explains in his commentary on the *Phenomenology*:

> The romantics shift the conception of modern freedom away from the ideal of rational, anonymous self-determination towards something more like the ideas of authenticity, irony and true feeling. In particular, they shift moral consciousness away from the idea of obedience to a self-imposed law toward the idea of being "true to oneself." The idealist transcendental self that is beyond appearance is displaced in favor of the actual, individual self, which is available to certain forms of introspection…. What is to bind free agents together in the world would not be an appeal to a common rational law, which each would freely impose on himself, but an appeal to conscience, to being true to oneself and one's convictions. Genuine freedom for the transcendental idealist consists in bringing one's personal convictions into line with what was required from an impersonal ("universal") point

[222] For a more detailed exposition of the way in which the Moral World-View functions as a critique of Kantian ethics, see Moltke S. Gram, "Moral and Literary Ideals in Hegel's Critique of 'the Moral World-View,'" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Jon Stewart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[223] Hegel followed Fichte's reworking of the categorical imperative: "always act according to your strongest conviction concerning your duty; always act in accordance with your own conscience." Ludwig Siep, "The 'Aufhebung' of Morality in Ethical Life," in *Hegel's Philosophy of Action*, ed. L.S. Stepelevich, et al. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1983), 144. This ethic of conscience found in Fichte's *System der Sittenlehre* replaces the conception of the moral law which is externally imposed with a conception of the moral law expressed in the deliverances of conscience. But making the moral law a function of conviction does not resolve the problem of conflicting duties, because one can feel the same amount of conviction toward two conflicting courses of action. Gram explains, "Just as the moral law could sanction either of two opposed duties, so also conscience can sanction either of two conflicting courses of action, so long as each carries with it the stamp of conviction.... So conscience fails just where the moral law failed: both purported to specify the sense in which a particular moral action is performed out of principle." Gram, "Moral and Literary Ideals in Hegel's Critique of 'the Moral World-View,'" 312.

> of view (the standpoint of "reason"). Genuine freedom for the romantic consists in acting from the personal point of view, in acting in accord with one's deepest personal convictions; it consists not merely of acting in terms of what is impersonally rationally justifiable but in terms, for example, of the agent's religious views, his concrete conceptions of the good life, his own personal biography, and so on– provided that these conceptions can be said to be genuinely his own.[224]

In Hegel's phenomenological account of the conscientious disposition, the figure of the beautiful soul stands in for a number of different arguments that Hegel wants to open up about how we are to live by our deepest convictions. For that reason, the figure of the beautiful soul Hegel describes is a philosophical abstraction; however, the task of specifying the beautiful soul's conceptual content is not straightforward. Hegel's descriptions are peppered with suggestive allusions. At various points he alludes to some of his contemporaries who dissented from the prevailing norms, pursued conscientious convictions or aspired to be beautiful souls, such as, Novalis. At other points he alludes to the fictional beautiful souls portrayed in the works of Goethe, Schlegel, Hölderlin, Schiller and Jacobi.

Commentators have had a field day unpacking the allusions in this section of the *Phenomenology* and trying to ascertain which historical and literary personages Hegel is singling out to elevate or demolish at each stage in the story,[225] often with the aim of establishing that these are in fact descriptions of real people who did exist outside their representation in writing.[226] The game of unpacking all of the allusions should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel treats forms of consciousness that admit of any number of embodiments. And we can speak of the beautiful soul as being existentially lived even if no one has fully embodied this typology. I propose reading this section not with the aim of teasing the referents out of the text but rather to ascertain how Hegel presents the possibility of getting beyond the problems of subjectivity through claims of conscience, counterclaims, confessions, recognition and reconciling forgiveness.

---

[224] Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209. Italics his.

[225] See, for example: Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System*; Donald P. Verene, *Hegel's Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

[226] Norton does not think the beautiful soul had a life outside of writings about it, see Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century*. Whereas Gram wants to establish that Hegel is finding the forms of consciousness that he criticizes in actual life and not just manufacturing them from the machinery of the dialectic. Gram, "Moral and Literary Ideals in Hegel's Critique of 'the Moral World-View,'" 308.

It may be something of a surprise that Hegel took an interest in the romantic conception of conscience, and that is because Hegel did not have much good to say about conscience. Hegel is often taken to be a critic of the form of moral consciousness called "Conscience" (*Das Gewissen*) on account of his blistering attacks on overly subjective conceptions of conscience. References to these attacks are sometimes coupled with a concern, raised by reading passages in the *Philosophy of Right*, that Hegel does not leave enough room for individual conviction in the institutions of ethical life.[227] Nevertheless there is a positive view of conscience in his work. Indeed, Hegel insists that conscience is central to an individual's personality and that it plays a vital role in ethical life.[228] In this section of the *Phenomenology,* Hegel is concerned to show the possibilities as well as the pitfalls of living according to one's conscience.[229]

On the romantic conception of conscience, you do your duty and act authentically when you follow your conscience. Following your conscience means doing what you have elected to do based on your own deepest convictions. These convictions determine the content of your action. The romantic individual discovers his deepest personal convictions by looking into his own subjectivity and by acting only on the convictions he can count as his own. In this way, he can be certain that he does what is true to his own self.

---

[227] A number of scholars have worked to clarify the role that Hegel's concept of conscience plays in his ethical and political philosophy. Those who see Hegel as an apologist for the absolutist nineteenth century Prussian monarchy find his account stifles agents of conscience under indifferent institutions. However, in recent years a range of scholars have concluded that these interpreters have got something wrong about Hegel's conception of conscience and its relation to the modern state. They argue that it is a misreading to overstate the authority of the modern state to limit freedom of conscience. On their view Hegel's account of modern ethical life in *Philosophy of Right* recognizes individuals as persons and secures for them an arena within which they are free from the incursion by the state and by others to act as they think appropriate, guided only by their own assessment of the good. See for example, Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 255-80; Siep, "The 'Aufhebung' of Morality in Ethical Life." Martin J. De Nys, "Conscience and Ethical Life," *The Owl of Minerva* 43, no. 1-2 (2011). For a recent study of the consistency between Hegel's conception of conscience and contemporary liberalism and communitarianism, and how best to relate Hegel's treatments of conscience, religion and political life in his later writings, see Timothy Brownlee, "Conscience and Religion in Hegel's Later Political Philosophy," Ibid. (2011-12).

[228] Dean Moyar has offered the most recent and most robust defence of the indispensable role conscience plays in Hegel's thought; so, it is disappointing that his treatment gives no space to the story of the beautiful soul. See Dean Moyar, *Hegel's Conscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[229] In reading of this section of the *Phenomenology*, the aim is to draw out what Hegel has to say about conscience and the beautiful soul, rather than to offer a detailed commentary on the *Phenomenology*. The number of commentaries has ballooned in recent years. A selection of the most recent would include: Michael Inwood, *Phenomenology of Spirit: Translated with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Kenneth R. Westphal, *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2009). John E. Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

In following their consciences, individuals can pursue their reflexively determined goals through their actions and be bound only by what they believe to be good. In that individuals are bound only by principles they themselves recognize as good, they do not need to rely on anything external to their own subjectivity to know what duty requires of them. A person needs only to act in accordance with his own understanding of the good to realize himself as an autonomous moral agent and an authentic individual. Nevertheless, as Pinkard points out, "such a self-exploration makes sense only in a social context in which the declarations of conscience and conviction are set off against the requirements that others make of him."[230] In other words, a person is able maintain that he has done his duty because others confer recognition on his actions and affirm his self-conception as an authentic individual.

In this conception of conscience, subjective convictions about what one should do matter,[231] but they matter within the context of relationships. So, while you are free to do as you will, that freedom can be exercised only within the limits set by those among whom you act.[232] Therefore any claim about your freedom to express your point of view–an assertion that characterizes selfhood–relies upon the recognition of others and must appeal to them. What Hegel finds compelling in the romantic conception of conscience is the assertion that our true motives can be found only in and through a process of social recognition.

Receiving the acknowledgement of others and their recognition that your decision is a conscientious one is what gives the subjective content of a claim of conscience its objective or universal element, uniting the personal and impersonal points of view. As Hegel puts it, recognition is what turns the deed into a reality.[233] That is not because others can tell you what your duty is, but because "what is implicit may depend on the possibility of making it

[230] Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason,* 212.
[231] Hegel states, "duty is no longer the universal that stands over against the self; on the contrary, it is known to have no validity when separated. It is now the law that exists for the sake of the self, not the self that exists for the sake of the law." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 387. §638. Later he states this explicitly in *Elements of Philosophy of Right,* "Conscience expresses the absolute entitlement of subjective self-consciousness to know in itself and from itself what right and duty are, and to recognize what it thus knows as the good. As this unity of subjective knowledge and that which has being in and for itself, conscience is a sanctuary which it would be sacrilege to violate." *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 158. §131.
[232] How is the need to receive the recognition of others not coercive? How does Hegel ensure moral subjects are free to act, guided only by their own assessment of the good? This is a key point of contact between Hegel and the liberal tradition. The question of how to ensure the social order gives adequate expression to moral subjectivity is the fundamental problem of political philosophy. Further examination of how political association should accommodate the ineliminable divergence among modern individual's conceptions of the good can be found in Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom*, 226.
[233] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 388. §640.

explicit," as Robert Brandom clarified in another context.[234] In other words, the set of considerations that were perhaps only implicit to you until you acted, invite reflections about what was socially embedded in the implicit norms on which you acted. So my action involves a mode of expression that opens that action up to the interpretation of others; therefore, "my sense of how I understand myself to be motivated must stand in some relation to what other agents would say is behind actions of such a types."[235] This means that "our own 'mindedness' requires a form of 'like-mindedness,'" and as Pinkard explains, "we always begin with a practical sense of ourselves as in the world, sharing a view-point with others, and adjusting our judgments in light of how we take those others to be 'carrying on,' and ultimately, in light of how we take the 'idealized community' of others to proceed."[236]

The community of romantic individuals is therefore bound together by a shared sense of who they are which is born out of the mutual declarations of their deepest convictions about what counts as having inherent and absolute value. Uniting a person's own subjective point of view with a universal one is conceivable in communities where the romantic individual can provide assurances that he is indeed acting in an appropriately self-determining matter when he makes declarations of conviction or protests in the name of conscience, and others can recognize those declarations and protestations as such.

The highest good in this conception is something like "the union of my particular projects, plans and view of the world... with what is required for me to act according to reasons that can be recognized by others as valid."[237] Or as Hegel phrases it, the highest good is the combining of the universal with the particular. And that is precisely what an appeal to conscience is meant to do, assuming the agent is acting with authenticity, that is, out of his most deeply held convictions, and that he says so explicitly in terms that communicate his judgment, for the sake of taking part in a normative process of mutual recognition and accountability.

---

[234] Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 8-9.
[235] Speight, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency*, 5.
[236] Terry Pinkard, "Virtues, Morality, and *Sittlichkeit*: From Maxims to Practices," *European Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1999): 10, 221.
[237] Ibid., 224.

The romantic conception of conscience thus gives place to moral subjectivity and to social recognition, both of which play constitutive roles in Hegel's vision of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*).[238] The self does not first exist as an independent individual and then enter into society. Instead the individual is constituted by social relations in the communities he is a part of, in the sense that the self-interpretations that define him are drawn from the language of the continuing conversations carried on by the community. While each individual is free to go his own way and acts only on the basis of his own conscience, in the process of trying to get clear about ourselves and about what ultimately matters, "we find ourselves committed to a common project of securing the conditions under which we can be free."[239] As Pinkard goes on to explain, "The community of romantics thus determines for itself as a community what is to count and what is not to count by virtue of each attempting to become an authentic individual and in each assisting the other through his acts of recognition to become such authentic individuals."[240] The problem with the post-revolutionary idealist moral worldview, as Hegel sees it, is that it does not have a place for this element of social recognition in the determination of motives.[241]

Narrating the protagonist's discoveries

In taking up the topic of conscience, Hegel offers a critical assessment of the romantic attempt to bring together the universal and particular elements of moral experience that had been separated in the Kantian account of duty and inclination. His cautionary tale invites us to imagine what we are doing when we stake a claim of conscience, in the wake of these romantic attempts, in order to show us how and where we will run into difficulties.

The protagonist in this tale is an unnamed romantic who is trying to live according to this conception of conscience. In the process, he reaches a number of impasses that challenge his self-understanding.[242] Pinkard describes that self-understanding as something like an

[238] Hegel envisions *Sittlichkeit* as a system of community-specific principles, practices, and virtues that should give our everyday practical reasoning about what is right and good. They are embedded in the social institutions of modern life (family, civil society and the state) and internalized through acculturation. Hegel reserves discussion of *Sittlichkeit* for a later work. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.
[239] Pinkard, "Virtues, Morality, and *Sittlichkeit*: From Maxims to Practices," 221.
[240] *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason,* 210.
[241] Ibid.
[242] I have used masculine pronouns to refer to Hegel's unnamed protagonist in this study, as there is no reason to assume Hegel was using terms such as consciousness, conscience, individual and self in a more inclusive way, given his views about women and their capacity for rational agency. Carla Lonzi has generated one of the more provocative deconstructions of the patriarchal character of Hegel's theories: Carla Lonzi, "Let's

"initially inarticulate sense of what our life's 'project' is about"; it is "the standard by which we determine which of our various desires and preferences ought to be fulfilled, pursued, put off, repressed, or sublimated."[243] For the most part, that self-understanding has arisen dialectically out of the limitations of previous ones: "each new fundamental orientation was required by virtue of the way in which the insufficiencies of that prior mode of orientation had, in light of failing to achieve some collective goal implicit in itself, unraveled and thereby committed agents to a different position vis-à-vis each other."[244] Hegel holds that this happens in the course of reflecting on the self-understanding you have. The conceptual tensions that emerge eventually make it "impossible for the participants to rationally sustain an allegiance to that way of articulating their lives, their relation to nature, and to each other."[245] Hegel's protagonist experiences these modern tensions and comes up against the limitations of each concept of conscience that he tries to live by. Hegel lays out both the self-defeating and the constructive ways in which his protagonist responds to these limitations.

As Hegel tells it, the protagonist's experiences of these modern tensions unfold something like a dialogue. It could be an internal dialogue with an antithetical consciousness or a discussion that is taking place between the protagonist and his counterparts. Either way, it is meant to be a formative experience for both the protagonist of this morality tale who finally comes to adopt a new normative orientation in life and for all who read this *Bildungsroman*.

Discovering the subjective reality of conscience

To draw us into this morality tale, Hegel asks us to consider a particular case of moral action.[246] The protagonist has made a decision of conscience. In coming to this decision, his sense of what he must do is not based on abstract universal reasons or goods, such as love or happiness, but rather on an awareness of his own individuality and of a specific duty he must fulfil.[247] The protagonist is also conscious that when he acts out of the conviction

Spit on Hegel," in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. Patricia J. Mills (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).
[243] Pinkard, "Virtues, Morality, and *Sittlichkeit*: From Maxims to Practices," 221.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid., 221-2.
[246] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 385. §635.
[247] Ibid., 386. §637.

of his individuality, he is in touch with the universal. What the protagonist is discovering is the subjective reality of conscience. He knows what he believes. He knows who he is. And he has the certainty of his convictions. He no longer thinks of morality in terms of performing pure duty. He can say, "I am my duty," as Harris points out, "and my duty is to be me."[248]

Our protagonist is conscientious because he wholeheartedly identifies with certain bedrock concerts and commitments that he experiences as being of crucial importance to who he understands himself to be. In order for his decision of conscience to be recognized as such by others, the protagonist needs only to be convinced that he knows his duty and be able to declare his conviction.[249] For in this conception of conscience it is the form of the act–a person's declaration of certainty about his conviction–rather than the content that makes it universal.[250] To put it another way, a person's duty as conviction is simply what he claims it to be; therefore, what becomes crucial is that he explicitly says he is acting on conscience. In staking a position of conscience, a person is therefore making an avowal: "whoever says he acts in such and such a way from conscience, speaks the truth, for his conscience is the self that knows and wills. But it is essential that he say so."[251]

The protagonist receives confirmation of the morality of his action through the recognition of others who acknowledge that this action is what duty demands of him in these specific circumstances. The conferral of recognition is not only one sided; there is a mutually to it. When our protagonist makes a declaration of conscience, he is at the same time recognizing others when they act on decisions of conscience and say so making their own declarations.[252] In this romantic community, "the spirit and substance of their association are thus the mutual assurance of their conscientiousness, good intentions, and the rejoicing over this mutual purity, and the refreshing of themselves in the glory of knowing and uttering, of cherishing and fostering, such an excellent state of affairs."[253]

At this point in the tale, our protagonist could be likened to a moral genius. For he relies

[248] Henry S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 463.
[249] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 396. §654.
[250] Ibid., 397. §655.
[251] Ibid. §654.
[252] Ibid. §654.
[253] Ibid., 398. §656.

not on norms or principles for his ethical knowledge but solely on the deliverances of conscience to provide the inspiration he needs.[254] He has so honed his skill that he has become attuned to the normative saliences of particular situations without being able to state general rules for them. There is a virtuosity to his discernment of just what should be done given who he is and what the situation demands. Moreover, pursing what is best for him takes account of the possible moral judgments of others and therefore puts him in harmony with the rest of his community.

The protagonist begins to see his moral deliberation as analogous to artistic creation. Because he has honed his skills, he has become attuned to the normative saliences of particular situations without being able to state general rules for them or having to rely on any kind of algorithm. He makes moral judgments by having had his moral sensibilities trained in the right way, just as an artist makes aesthetic judgments by having had his eye trained in certain ways.[255] As the protagonist sees it, his conscience "is creative of moral experience in just the way that an artist creates a work of art."[256] He also believes that others will see it as he see it, if they have taste, and be in a position to recognize that what he does is right and beautiful.[257]

When our protagonist hears the voice of conscience, he now believes he hears the voice of God. It is not the voice of God as lawgiver, but rather the voice of God as creator. That is because our protagonist no longer sees himself as an autonomous legislator laying a law upon himself. He sees himself as a creator who has a revelation of his own creative essence.[258] In taking this view, Hegel says his protagonist's conscience "in the majesty of its elevation above specific law and every content of duty, puts whatever content it pleases into its knowing and willing. It is the moral genius which knows the inner voice of what it immediately knows to be a divine voice."[259] Our protagonist now has "the majesty of absolute autarky, to bind and to loose." [260]

---

[254] Ibid., 397. §655.
[255] Pinkard, "Virtues, Morality, and *Sittlichkeit*: From Maxims to Practices," 227.
[256] Gram, "Moral and Literary Ideals in Hegel's Critique of 'the Moral World-View,'" 314. Gram argues that this is the very form of conscience depicted in Jacobi's novels.
[257] For more on how an individual with a romantic conscience taking this aesthetical approach would express his adherence to a standard other agents might accept and the problems such an approach raises, see Terry Pinkard, "What Is a 'Shape of Spirit'?," in *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, ed. Dean Moyar and Michael Quante (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 123-4.
[258] Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, 458.
[259] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 397. §655.
[260] Ibid., 393. §646.

As an inspired, creative, moral agent living according to his conscience our protagonist has discovered a new dignity. He could even be said to possess a certain moral beauty. This beauty consists in having found a way of living in the world where he can do the right thing at each opportunity as if by feel, without having to make determinations about his duty at every turn. What others find compelling and attractive about his mode of life is that "his own individuality and emotional life supposedly line up almost perfectly with the demands of reason, such that his own conscientious action is the best guide to what is really required by the moral law."[261]

Losing hold of his conviction

In the wake of the discovery of the subjective reality of consciences, the protagonist becomes aware of new insights and new difficulties. What a decision of conscience requires in order count as a decision of conscience is self-certainty, namely, the self-certainty that this is what our protagonist must do in these circumstances. But on reflection that self-certainty is very hard to maintain. What undermines his self-certainty is, firstly, a growing awareness of the emptiness of his claim. Conscience affirms his individuality and tells him what not to do, but not necessarily what to do. To put it another way, our protagonist knows that what he must do depends on who he is, but conscience does not specify any determinate duty or action.[262] That is because conscience is formal. All our protagonist can really be certain of is that he is exempt from doing anything that goes against his conscience.

Other doubts begin to chip away at his certainty too. For instance, the certainty he should have rests on his knowledge of his own individuality. But he simply does not have full knowledge of his own motives or of his intentions. Nor does he know all the circumstances or consequences that should shape his decisions.[263] Knowledge of his own purposes, projects and circumstances was meant to show him what conscience dictates that he should do, but it is simply not possible for him to fully know himself. He is neither aware of his unconscious convictions nor of his deeper motives. A perfect self-conception of individuality is not attainable. Feebleness, fallibility and finitude place a perfect self-conception beyond

[261] Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 241.
[262] *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason,* 211; Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 391. §644.
[263] *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 389. §642.

reach. So, while he claims his action to be universal and that he has total responsibility for it, his claim is unsupportable.

To make things worse, he is also beginning to perceive that there could be a disjunction between the specific duty he believes he is called to perform and the specific duty that any other individual might be called to perform in a similar situation. The problem is that his individuality - by which Hegel means his own personal standard about what is right for him - is not necessarily the same as anyone else's. While this may seem obvious, this implication is that his action is not impersonal and, if so, it could not attain universality.[264] This new awareness of the potential disparity between his own particular purposes and the universal throws our protagonist into doubt. With these three discoveries–of the emptiness of conscience, of the limited self-knowledge he can obtain, and of the possibility that his action might not attain to universality after all–he can no longer maintain unwavering self-certainty.

Losing control over how his actions are viewed

Our protagonist is not only struggling to maintain certainty in his conviction about his duty, he is also struggling to assure others that his appeal to conscience is valid. He knows that he fulfils his duty in this specific case as its content is contained in his certainty of himself. But he cannot help but look at his action from the point of view of others, as he needs their recognition. The problem is that those who must judge whether or not his action does conform to duty might see it differently. And that causes him to oscillate between his own self-certainty and self-doubt stemming from how others might react.[265]

Hegel asks us to imagine that the protagonist determines to increase his wealth in a certain way. The protagonist may think that it is everyone's duty to provide for himself and to support his dependents. Alternatively, he may think to himself that he ought to become more prosperous because the more he has, the more he would be able to give to neighbors

[264] Ibid., 400. §659. "[T]he language in which all reciprocally acknowledge each other as acting conscientiously, this universal identity, falls apart into the non-identity of individual being-for-self: each consciousness is just as much simply reflected out of its universality into itself. As a result, the antithesis of individuality to other individuals, and to the universal, inevitably comes on the scene...."
[265] Ibid., 393-94. §647-8.

in need. In fact, he may be motivated by any number of good reasons.[266] The point is that he has self-certain conviction that increasing his wealth fulfils this duty in this particular case, however he came to that conclusion. But his action might have a different meaning for other people, and they may not find it morally acceptable. For instance, the more skeptical might suspect he is not acting in order to fulfil his duty based on what is best for all and that he is only doing what he likes.[267]

The only assurance others have that the protagonist is acting morally is the protagonist's word that he convinced of his duty and knows in his own mind what that duty is.[268] While the declaration of conviction is supposed to be taken as absolute explanation, it offers no reasons. Even if the protagonist declares, "I assure you, I am convinced that I am doing what is right," that declaration of conviction is all anyone has to go on. The problem is that others can only evaluate his claim of conscience on the basis of his self-certainty, and self-certain declarations of conscience–"This is my duty because I say it is"–sound indistinguishable from statements of self-assertion or fiats of will. So, others may judge him to have taken the universal will as his principle, thereby recognizing the truth of his claim. Or they may also conclude that he has acted in his self-interest, giving it priority over the universal. The protagonist's growing awareness that he may be perceived as acting according to caprice, rather than according to conscience, gives rise to an antithesis between what he is for himself and what he is for others.[269]

Spaemann describes the protagonist's predicament when he writes that "the problem with saying my conscience tells me to do X and leaving it at that, is that it assumes that calling something a decision of conscience constitutes a sufficient reason in and of itself not to do something and that by its very nature it is conclusive or unassailable."[270] What our protagonist is now confronted with is the fact that his declaration of conscience cannot be placed beyond dispute, even if it comes with the assurance of his certainty. For others cannot be as certain about his motives and his assurances cannot dispel skepticism.

---

[266] Ibid., 391. §644.
[267] Ibid., 395. §650.
[268] Ibid., 396. §653.
[269] Ibid., 401. §659.
[270] Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169.

Speight relates the dilemma of Hegel's protagonist back to us in this fashion: "on the one hand, your claim that you have acted conscientiously cannot be denied, since no one but you has access to your conscience in this sense; on the other hand, my interpretation of your action as stemming from an un-charitable motive (greed, ambition) also cannot be denied, since it, too, is dependent on an introspection that cannot be communicable."[271] A question mark is now placed over the protagonist's actual motivating reasons and commitments and whether they align with his declaration to have acted according to conscience. As long as there is a lack of identity between the protagonist's claim of conscience and the acknowledged universal, any attempt to win the acknowledgement of others that what he has done was really his duty, seems to undermine his claim to have universal validity and therefore to legitimacy.[272] To put it another way, our protagonist is now caught between competing interpretations of his action and is unable to have his claim to have acted conscientiously legitimized.

The risks of taking action and the discovery of evil

At this point the romantic conception of conscience presumed by our protagonist threatens to undermine his aspiration to live conscientiously. The problem with asserting that the ethical nature of an action is determined by the certainty with which he the agent holds something to be right is that his subjective opinion becomes the criterion for judging what is good and right. His inner law has become the moral law. Because there is no disputing a declaration of conviction, simply calling his action "conscience" is enough to make anything right. Therefore, the protagonist could rationalize whatever he does. He alone determines whatever ties he feels are appropriate, and whatever he does is good insofar as his convictions determine it to be good.[273]

He must be his own moral index now. For our protagonist this brings with it a new sense of consciousness–the awareness of "evil consciousness." Evil has a specific meaning here. It is not a matter of possessing malice or vice. An evil act is simply one where a person has put his own law above the demands of universal law.[274] Any instance in which self-interest takes

[271] Speight, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency*, 105.
[272] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 402. §662.
[273] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 178-9. §140.
[274] Ibid., 167. §139. "Where all previously valid determinations have vanished and the will is in a state of pure inwardness, the self-consciousness is capable of making into its principle either the universal in and for itself,

priority over the universal is evil. So evil might take the form of believing that "all that matters is a decision one way or the other" or that it is my arbitrary will is what makes an action good. My subjective conviction rather than reason makes the decision and therefore my conviction becomes "the master over good, right, evil, truth."[275]

The protagonist has come to the unhappy realization that when he follows his conscience, he may in fact be perpetuating evil. For as soon as he acts, his declaration becomes a public deed which is open to the interpretations of others. Once his declaration becomes a deed, it takes on the form of particular individual duty, which is indistinguishable from something base such as an assertion of subjective will. As other people have only his declaration of conviction about his duty to go on, they are just as likely to conclude he is doing some evil based on self-interested motives and to discredit him as they are to conclude that he is doing his particular duty and give him recognition. So the protagonist is stuck between a rock and a hard place. He is pulled between the need to put his private judgment into action, but he also needs universal recognition that his action was indeed conscientious.

The protagonist knows that when he does act, he has no control over what his action means. So he adopts a new strategy and begins to speak of having done his duty without actually acting upon it.[276] He understands the importance of action but dreads its possible evil consequence, given that taking action invites the possibility of a clash between what he intended (or thinks he intended) and how what he does is interpreted, especially if others concluded he is mistaken. Pinkard describes how precarious it now feels to take any action given that it is possible that "one can mean one thing but have it end up meaning something else, one can disguise one's motives from oneself, and one can continue to insist that what one did was beneficial when it is clear to all around that it was harmful."[277]

What the protagonist has discovered in his quest for universality, and tried to eschew, is the violence of this evil. Sax describes the crisis of conviction that strikes the protagonist in these terms:

---

or the arbitrariness of its own particularity, giving the latter precedence over the universal and realizing it through its actions – It is capable of being evil."

[275] That is how Ludwig Siep draws out Hegel's meaning based on his reading of *Philosophy of Right*. Siep, "The 'Aufhebung' of Morality in Ethical Life," 144; Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 178. §140.

[276] "Just as every action is capable of being looked at from the point of view of conformity to duty, so too can it be considered from the point of view of the particularity [of the doer]; do, *qua* action it is the actuality of the individual." *Phenomenology of Spirit* 403-4. §664-5.

[277] Pinkard, "What Is a 'Shape of Spirit'?" 124.

> Every deed is an act of violence. To act at all is to interfere with the course of things, to impinge on others. There is always violence involved... a violence which is overcome neither in conviction's good intentions nor in individuality's attempts to justify its activity through mutual recognition. A world that is free of violence is not a world of true selfhood and certainty of individuality.... To be an individuality is to be in conflict with others but also with their judgments.... It must declare that there are no innocent actions and must unmask all attempts to cover up or displace this evil under the claim to the universal.[278]

Moreover, taking a position on the basis of conscience necessarily involves claiming something over against another and treating it as privileged. It is more akin to pushing an agenda than to making an innocent remark. Asserting individuality means throwing your weight around; and for that reason, every act of conscience entails violence. That violence may be motivated by conscientious convictions about what is right that attain universality or it could be driven by sheer power interests, but there is always violence, because to act at all is to interfere with the course of things and to impinge on others.[279]

The protagonist's realization that there are no innocent actions leads to paralyzing anxiety about moral complexity of his situation and his own complicity in perpetuating the wrongs he sees all around him. He does not want to be implicated in these injustices or to have his own self-understanding and moral reputation tarnished by them in any way. The problem, as one sociologist described it, is that "there's no way for a person living in the world to truly do no harm."[280]

Renouncing action seems the only way to place his moral judgment beyond criticism. The protagonist can think of no other way to avoid discord. He sees himself as pure of heart not as wicked or violent, but the only way he can preserve that self-image is to avoid putting his conscientious convictions into action, given the exposure that would bring. For any action he might take could be re-cast as a self-aggrandizing imposition of his own subjective opinion. There seems to be only way to keep his hands clean and that is by staying out of it. So he refuses to get involved. He reasons that if he takes no action, he can do no wrong.[281]

---

[278] Sax, "Active Individuality and the Language of Confession: The Figure of the Beautiful Soul in the *Lehrjahre* and the *Phänomenologie*," 456.
[279] Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 194.
[280] Julie Beck, "The Folly of 'Purity Politics': An Interview with Alexis Shotwell," *The Atlantic* (2017), https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/01/purity-politics/513704/.
[281] Unfortunately, as Lauer observes, "the negative satisfaction of an un-sullied conscience is an empty satisfaction–one, perhaps, does no wrong if one does not act, but one does no right either." Quentin Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 253.

How to cultivate a beautiful soul

The protagonist no longer tries to represent himself as the universal voice of morality to others, as he cannot hope to do that without inciting conflict, perpetuating evil or doing violence, but he believes he can be true to himself and he makes that his goal. His social world may be riven by conflicting interpretations about what things mean, but he knows there is a world within him and that he can be at one with himself there. In his inmost self he can achieve some expression of peace, harmony and authenticity, if nowhere else. He thinks that by turning inward he will find what Terry Pinkard calls "a way of being a law unto oneself that does not implicate oneself in the messiness of life but keeps one free and pure."[282] It is the dream of attaining a unified subjectivity, apart from the divisions of the world, and of living in such a way as to be unsullied by the existence of those divisions.

The protagonist aspires to be a beautiful soul. As a moral and spiritual pathway to perfection, cultivating a beautiful soul could be likened to an interior pilgrimage to the secret core of the self. It is a path of intense self-scrutiny and self-examination. The hope is that the end of all our exploring will be to arrive at a dimension of our self that somehow transcends our particularity.[283]

To attain a beautiful soul, the protagonist must construct a world for himself out of his inmost being. He wants to pursue this project with maximum freedom, so he begins by cutting his social ties and extricating himself from any substantive social involvement that would check or direct his will in any way. His goal is to create a self-sufficient life, one in which there no sense of limitation or constraint.[284]

Most of all, he wants to place his certainties where they cannot be shaken by the doubts of others. In withdrawing from his associations and detaching himself from everything around him, he retreats to a private realm to contemplate his inmost self. He hopes contemplating his identity will intensify his convictions, strengthening and sustaining them from within.

---

[282] Pinkard, "What Is a 'Shape of Spirit'?" 124.

[283] For a concise treatment of the imperative to turn within and a critique of the claim that an authentic self can be discovered through introspection see Charles Guignon's treatment of authenticity. Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2004), 60.

[284] This desire certainly persists. Christian Smith sees this concern for unfettered self-creation as *the* typical postmodern reaction to the Enlightenment, where "liberated from the constraints not only of tradition and moral order but also the dictates of universal reason, the individual self is set free to explore a fluid existence of eclectic self-definition, innovation, and metamorphosis with little need for a rationale or account." Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 156-7.

This is how Hegel depicts his mindset: "It lives in dread of besmirching the splendor of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world...."[285] This flight from participation is one of the hallmarks of the beautiful soul.

The beautiful soul's conscientious objections look increasingly like separation rather than effectual protest. Unfortunately, this separation from his social world does not shore up our protagonist's beliefs; it creates further problems for him. Inaction presents just as many conceptual traps as action. For instance, the protagonist knows that a decision of conscience is a judgment about his conduct–about what he has to do or what he must not do–and not a judgment upon a speculative truth or a general proposition. His decision of conscience pertains to a concrete action. For him to claim to know his moral duty according to conscience is for him to know what action fits his concrete set of circumstances. It makes no sense to declare what his conscience demands that he do if he has no intention of actually doing that. He cannot really be said to have followed his conscience.

The protagonist continues to make declarations about the wrongs he opposes in the name of conscience. He still wants to be heard but he does not want to listen, especially if that means listening to criticism or being challenged by the skepticism of others.[286] So his communications tend to go only one way. His hope is that the mere fact of stating what his conscience says will be a sufficient explanation and justification of his position and will curtail any discussion about what he is or is not going to do. At this point his reluctance to engage with others or with the world around him is seriously curtailing his agency. It seems that all he can do is record his impressions in his diary and continue to cultivate a beautiful existence.[287] His desire to be at peace with himself and in harmony at any cost leaves him no other scope for self-expression. Pinkard describes the trap that the protagonist and other beautiful souls fall into by renouncing action and retreating from the world:

> The beauty of their actions is an internal harmony that in principle cannot be tested by the world; like Wittgenstein's "private language," the various meanings existing in harmony in a beautiful soul are thus private affairs that in principle cannot be expressed, since any expression automatically disrupts that harmony. The "beautiful soul" cannot even tell others about its own internal harmony since doing

[285] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 400. §658.
[286] Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, 498.
[287] One might look for contemporary beautiful souls among the users of Instagram.

> even that would disrupt the harmony (since even saying something opens oneself up to possible misunderstanding).[288]

The beautiful soul had reasoned that the best way to stand by his convictions was not to act on them but rather to preserve them. If the only thing he could be sure of in a world of misunderstanding and violence is that he has conscientious convictions, then it is better to remain silent about what he believes and do nothing. Once he is no longer willing to put his convictions speech, let alone action, preserving the beauty of his existence comes at the cost of self-erasure, and it feels like vanishing.[289]

His attempts to preserve the harmony he has attained in contemplation of his individuality now threaten to be his undoing. Trying to internalize what ought to be external robs him of any objectivity. He edges closer towards solipsism. Hegel describes the emptiness of this existence by stating that the beautiful soul now has no more substance than a "hollow object."

> Its activity is a yearning which merely loses itself as consciousness becomes an object devoid of substance, and rising above this loss, and falling back on itself, finds itself only as a lost soul. In this transparent purity of its moments, and unhappy, so-called "beautiful soul," its light dies away within it, and it vanishes like a shapeless vapor that dissolves into thin air.[290]

So far, the beautiful soul's unwillingness to compromise the authenticity, purity and harmony of his conscientious beliefs has amounted to a beautiful life, perhaps, but also to life of inaction. As long as he persists in this solitary way of life, the beautiful soul continues down a path that leads to madness. This is how the journey ends:

> The "beautiful soul," lacking an actual existence, entangled in the contradiction between its pure self and the necessity of that self to externalize itself and change itself into an actual existence... being conscious of this contradiction in its

---

[288] Pinkard, "What Is a 'Shape of Spirit'?" 124.

[289] In Hegel's words: "Here, then, we see self-consciousness withdrawn into its innermost being… what is for it *intrinsic* and what is for its *existence*, have evaporated into abstractions which no longer have any stability, any substance for this consciousness itself…. Refined into this purity, consciousness exists in its poorest shape, and this poverty, constituting its single possession, is itself a vanishing. This absolute *certainty*, in which substance has dissolved, is the absolute *untruth*, which collapses internally." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 398-99. §657.

[290] Ibid., 400. §658. Christian Smith's verdict seems apt here: "The truly autonomous individual turns out to be a dead individual in every way imaginable." Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*, 156.

> unreconciled immediacy, is disordered to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning and pines away in consumption.[291]

The beautiful soul can only break out of this bind if he asserts himself and takes action. Taking that step opens up two possible modes of existence. Both offer the illusion of preserving the harmony and beauty he has cultivated for himself. He may decide to adopt the attitude of a judgmental critic going forward or he may decide to take the attitude of an ironic actor.

The hypocrisy and hard-heartedness of the beautiful soul

As a judgmental critic the beautiful soul is seen as "quick to condemn while being glacially slow to act, so worried about dirtying his hands that he can never bring them into contact with anything in the world."[292] His attitude is judgmental because he is constantly assessing the correspondence between the particular actions and principles of others and is "quick to point out and denounce what he sees as the stain on others' hands."[293] His own tendency is to assume that the moral condemnation he metes out amounts to action.

Alternatively, the beautiful soul may adopt the attitude of an ironic actor. When he takes an ironic stance, the beautiful soul is seen as "the man behind the mask, who can never be pinned down to any particular identity."[294] He acts but is unwilling to be identified with any plan, action or belief he might hold. He distances himself from all commitments by insisting his inward unity can never be determined by his particular actions. He is unwilling to be held to anything "except the smug assertion of… [his] own moral and aesthetic superiority."[295]

When an ironic actor purports to act with moral purpose, declaring that he is a spokesman of a moral order that opposes the existing moral order, the judgmental beautiful soul takes issue. This opens a dialogue between these two oppositional stances, with their rival attitudes towards the universal constitutive of conscience. The judgmental beautiful soul who is reluctant to act tries to unmask the moral pretensions of the ironic beautiful soul

[291] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 406-7. §668.
[292] Pinkard, "What Is a 'Shape of Spirit'?" 125-6.
[293] Ibid.
[294] Ibid.
[295] *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism*, 131-2.

who is reluctant to be defined by his deeds. The judgmental beautiful soul accuses the acting beautiful soul of evil in order to expose the supposed universality of actor's claims for what they are: merely a mask for self-interested motives.[296]

In trying to discredit the ironic actor, the judgmental beautiful soul inadvertently exposes himself to the charge of hypocrisy. For he does what he accuses the actor of doing: claiming to be a representative of the moral order. But he has not acted morally. He just feigns morality by representing his condemnation as moral action.[297] In this he wrongs others by trying to suggest this evil is really something good. Pinkard describes the two mindsets like this:

> Each sees the other as what Kant called "radical evil," the perpetual temptation to substitute one's own self-love for the messiness of trying to sort out the moral law in the real world, with the judgmental moralist seeing the ironist as an attempt to flee responsibility, and the ironist seeing the judgmental moralist as somebody trying to impose his own contingent set of values on others under the pretext of claiming universal validity for them.[298]

Neither the ironic actor nor the judgmental critic can relinquish their emotional and psychological investment in the way they see the world. Both of these mindsets have "an obsession with its own sense of self-righteousness," as Howard puts it, and refuse "to admit the authority of public reasons for fear of what impact this will have on its own sense of superiority and self-esteem."[299] This launches a string of allegations. When one denounces the other for imposing his own views on others while feigning to act of respect for the demands of morality, that accusation is immediately met with a contemptuous counter-claim.

At a certain point, "the fact that each accuses the other of doing only what he himself if doing makes it more or less explicit to the agents taken up in these flurries of moralistic and ironic accusation that each is after all only a particular point of view."[300] The ironic actor is the first to intuit this. He realizes that his actions really do determine who he is and sees

---

[296] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spiri,t* 402. §663-5. My reading of Hegel's text follows Gram's here. Gram, "Moral and Literary Ideals in Hegel's Critique of 'the Moral World-View'," 325-30.
[297] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 403. §664.
[298] Pinkard, "What Is a 'Shape of Spirit'?" 125-6.
[299] Jason J. Howard, "Translating Convictions into a Clear Conscience," *The Owl of Minerva* 43, no. 1-2 (2011): 115-6.
[300] Terry Pinkard, "Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Logic*: An Overview," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. K. Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 170.

that the judgmental critic who tried to discredit him was right: in refusing to be identified with his actions he was avoiding the responsibility of having to sort out what the moral law demanded.[301] The ironic actor recognizes that he is on a level with the moralist in that they both perpetuated evil. For the perspective of the agent and the perspective of the one observing the action are partial.

The actor confesses this, expecting that the moralist will recognize himself in this description and come to see what each of them has been doing and how one sided and biased their accusations really are.[302] But in a further turn of the dialectic, the critic declines to respond with a reciprocal confession.[303] Instead he repulses the repentant actor. At this point the critic becomes "the Hard Heart." The Hard Heart is unable to recognize himself in, or as, his counterpart, who he exposed as evil. As Harris explains, the Hard Heart is loath "to find itself guilty of not acting to create the better life of which it was pretending to be the expression."[304] So he condemns the evil of the age and steels himself against the existing order.

Only when the Hard Heart faces up to having sinned in the same way as the actor had can he confess and receive pardon. When the Hard Heart finally breaks, the self-enclosure effected by individual conviction breaks opens too. This is what makes mutual recognition possible. Mutual recognition is not about appreciating "the rationality of the modern state or the fact of pluralism in it."[305] Mutual recognition is about seeing themselves in one another and realizing their differences are not going to go away. The two sides reach a reconciliation when "each comes to understand that it is impossible to prize apart the demands of personal interest (and the aims, projects, and evaluations bound up with being an individual agent) and the demands of morality."[306] And on that basis they can forgive each other for the accusations they made.[307]

---

[301] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 403. §664.
[302] Ibid., 405-6. §667.
[303] Ibid. §667.
[304] Harris, 502.
[305] Terry Pinkard, "Norms, Facts and Forms of Life in the Phenomenology," (2009), https://terrypinkard.weebly.com/articles-for-downloading.html.
[306] "Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Logic*: An Overview," 170.
[307] What happens is that the hard-heart abandons "its *subjectively* determined judgment, just as the other abandons its *subjective* characterization of action." Hegel pronounces that "The word of reconciliation is the *objectively* existent Spirit, which beholds the pure knowledge of itself *qua universal* essence, in its opposite, in the pure knowledge of itself qua absolutely self-contained and exclusive *individuality*–a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* Spirit." Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2003). Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 408. §670.

What the beautiful soul comes to understand

> One of the discoveries that the protagonist makes in being reconciled is of the need for accountability. That means finding ways of reflecting on the background assumptions about his values and motives that he might be unaware of or take for granted. It also means finding ways of putting those things that go without saying into words, however difficult that may be. As Pinkard puts it, "individual agents to be able to state what it is that counts as their individually adhering to the rules they have laid down for themselves (or what those 'projects' require)."[308] And they need to state that in a manner that is not purely self-referential.

What the beautiful soul has learned is that confidence in conscientious judgments is dependent on identifying with obligations that are larger than he is. And that he needs to bind himself to them without surrendering his commitment to freedom. Hegel insists that to be true to our consciences in this way is an achievement. This is genuine conscience: conscience that holds together the particular and universal and is both intersubjective and rational.[309] As Howard explains:

> The demand for universality is supplied at the level of modern ethical life through the universal institutions of the family, Civil Society and the State, while the demand for particularity is met at the level of the specific individual and her personal concerns. In willing that her particular purposes be satisfying and reasonable, while also matching up with larger obligations of a more universal sort, the demand for individuality is met with the singular individual knowingly committing herself to larger moral norms but doing so through the standpoint of her own personal obligations.[310]

The task is to find reasons for our conscientious decisions that we can share. One of the lessons we are meant to take from Hegel's cautionary tale is that good reasons for our actions are not subjective (existing only in relation to individuals) or objective (therefore for everyone) but intersubjective. This lesson here, according to Pinkard, is that "what counts as 'rational for us' is not going to appear in abstracting ourselves from all social participation, but "must appear within a determinate type of mutual dependency."[311]

---

[308] Pinkard, "Norms, Facts and Forms of Life in the Phenomenology," 7.
[309] In *Philosophy of Right,* Hegel draws a distinction between true or genuine conscience and formal conscience. Genuine conscience is intersubjective and rational. Formal conscience lacks intersubjective content. It is purely subjective and determines for itself what is right without regard for truth or falsity. This is conscience only in name. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 165. §137.
[310] Howard, "Translating Convictions into a Clear Conscience," 112.
[311] Pinkard, "Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Logic*: An Overview," 240.

Hegel's emphasis on mutual recognition is meant to show us that good reasons are established communally in the process of reflecting on what it is that binds us together without denying our distinctively modern sense of individuality. As Speight observes, "a successful reason for action, as Hegel will come to elaborate in the *Philosophy of Right*, can be neither a purely moral imperative nor a purely prudential reason for action, but must involve both an ethical connection to another and some sense that I myself desire that connection."[312] In other words, our reasons need to refer to the particular desires, inclinations, interests and purposes that we have developed over the course of our lives. And those reasons need to be put into terms that can be reasoned, discussed and debated.[313]

In being reconciled, the beautiful soul has come to understand that the true language of conscience cannot be the language of individual conviction. The language of conviction was meant to reveal the inner law of the heart but was only partially revelatory.[314] The language of conviction permits the protagonist to declare that his actions are his own ("the truth of his being") but not to acknowledge that his actions might impinge on or deny the individuality of others. He needs a language that will help him talk about the way contingent interests and power shapes and distorts his actions.

When the protagonist tried to obtain universal acknowledgement of his actions with only the language of conviction at his disposal, he had no way of conceding that his actions may wrong others or be innately evil. He could only try to convince others of their goodness, undermining his claim that his actions are indicative of who he truly is. The beautiful soul's painful discovery was that the language of conviction could express one truth about individuality but only by masking another truth. It is no wonder he felt he could not put his convictions into action and that eventually even speaking about his convictions was self-defeating. The language of conviction simply is not up to the task.

New possibilities come into being with the language of confession. Sax draws out this importance of this discovery for the beautiful soul when he explains that:

---

[312] Speight, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency*, 121.
[313] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 388. §640.
[314] Sax, "Active Individuality and the Language of Confession: The Figure of the Beautiful Soul in the *Lehrjahre* and the *Phänomenologie*," 457.

> In confession, the act and the language of the act are one. It is only through an understanding of the specific nature of the self, its natural impulses and inclinations, its form of self-understanding, its knowledge of circumstances, and of the deed that it performed, that the self is revealed and opened to others. No generalization of human nature, no claim to be expressing the universal in every action, is adequate to this purpose.... The self exhibited in confessional language is neither a mere doer of deeds nor some bundle of impulses and inclinations, some unrealized nature, but a self that acts and has acted and recognizes itself both as the agent of these actions and as the self who is acknowledged by others as this agent. The self is the mutual constitution of individuality in language in the community of Spirit.[315]

Conscience does not only require the language of confession. Hegel wants us to the understand that it also needs social practices and institutions which can help us acquire the dispositions, habits and virtues necessary to risk taking action under the conditions of modernity.[316] Without those it is all too easy to take one look at issues of moral complexity and decide to respond by carefully curating our lifestyles. For the romanticism of the beautiful soul lives on in the notion that we might simply work on attaining purity or tranquility instead of engaging in actual political processes. The sociologist Alexis Shotwell recently observed that when we start wondering how we are going to solve all the problems of modern life–environmental degradation, institutional racism, forced migration and so on–a certain tendency is evident, for "both professional ethicists and everyday people turn very quickly to focusing on what we personally, individually, can do to either manage our responsibility or to protect ourselves from how hard it is to be in this world. We say, "Oh we're so connected, and it's so complicated, and then the first thing we do is try to manage our own personal situation in relation to that."[317] Hegel's morality tale speaks to that desire to escape our predicament rather than face the complexities and messiness of life: the ways in which we are compromised, the ways in which our own attitudes present obstacles, the one sidedness of our judgments and the ways in which we refuse to recognize ourselves in others.

While trying to live with a clean conscience may seem like a perfectly reasonable response to complex moral problems, it is a risky strategy. In Hegel's tale of the fate of the beautiful

---

[315] Ibid.

[316] Pinkard, "Norms, Facts and Forms of Life in the Phenomenology." 19-20.

[317] Julie Beck, "The Folly of Purity Politics; an interview with Alexis Shotwell," *The Atlantic* (2017). Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/01/purity-politics/513704/Alexis Shotwell notes that when individualism is combined with the desire for moral purity that translates into what she calls purity politics or "purism." For more, see Alexis Shotwell's recent book: Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

soul, it is shown to be both futile and counter-productive. Cultivating a beautiful soul is futile because there is no way of living in the world and doing no harm. And when we realize we are still complicit–despite our best efforts to extricate ourselves–we are liable to give up. Cultivating a beautiful soul is also counter-productive. It does not do us any good to aim for our own purity or integrity. When we start doing that, we become solipsistic and narcissistic; we become very focused on our own personal project rather than aiming to make the bigger, more systemic changes that are called for, as Shotwell warned. Focusing on what I can do in my own sphere for the sake of my conscience forecloses all sorts of social practices and forms of solidarity, whereas many of the wrongs that need to be righted in the world can only be adequately addressed by working together.

So how are we supposed to conscientiously work for peace or justice in the world, stomaching the potential conflicts and inevitable compromises that come with that, without retreating into projects that are simply focused on giving us some peace of mind? Hegel's verdict is that we cannot escape the moral crises of our age by retreating from them but that we can confess the ways in which we are implicated in them. That means acknowledging the difficulties and complexities of our relationships and of our place in society, recognizing the need to work through difficult situations with others and participating in institutional life.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the figure of the beautiful soul as Hegel deployed it in his cautionary tale. First it laid out the Kantian context of conscience to which Hegel was reacting. Then it looked at how Hegel sets up this cautionary tale as an internal dialogue. Finally, it re-narrated what the protagonist learned in the process of living according to conscience: that conscience is a subjective reality; that conscience is formal; that others cannot intuit whether his motives are truly conscientious or merely self-serving; and that taking action invites risk. To avoid that potential risk, the protagonist no longer takes any action at all. Renouncing action, he cultivates a beautiful existence instead. He hoped that the mere fact of stating what his conscience says will be a sufficient explanation and justification of his position. In passing off his words for deeds, he can take the stance of an ironic actor or of a judging critic. Either way he must learn to see the one-sidedness of his position and be reconciled with the other or end his days narcissistically cultivating a beautiful but empty existence.

This chapter then examined the discoveries that come with being reconciled. Hegel's protagonist comes to understand that if he is going to follow his conscience, he needs to put the reasons for his action into the language of confession and mutual recognition. Hegel's protagonist also comes to understand that he needs to work through difficult situations with others, to create new solidarities and to participate in institutional life. They will help him to acquire the dispositions, habits and virtues necessary to risk taking action under the conditions of modernity. This is how to avoid the fate of the beautiful soul. Otherwise, we will to shy away from the demands of justice and benevolence, as Hegel's protagonist did, making moral purity or inner peace our goal rather than engaging in actual political processes.

V

Conscience on Trial: Arendt and the re-working of conscience

Introduction

One of the most subtly devastating critiques of a political thinker in the twentieth century was meted out by Gillian Rose when she described Hannah Arendt as a beautiful soul. Hannah Arendt had engaged with the beautiful soul tradition when studying the correspondences of the writer Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833). Varnhagen hosted one of the most prominent salons in Europe. She was an acquaintance of Goethe, and he had called her a beautiful soul, which may or may not have been praise. Arendt found Varnhagen incredibly compelling as an emancipated woman and an emancipated Jew, and she closely identified with Varnhagen's experiences in her own search for a German Jewish identity and her struggle as a female philosopher. So closely, in fact, that the biography she published of Varnhagen is written "from within," taking Varnhagen's letters as her own and assuming her voice in an attempt to reflect on both of their lives at the same time. Arendt declared that Varnhagen ultimately had become "my closest friend, though she has been dead for some hundred years."[318] But it was not merely this identification with Varnhagen that led Gillian Rose to critique Arendt as a beautiful soul.

Gillian Rose singled out Arendt as representing the beautiful soul in Germany during the transition from Social Democracy to totalitarian rule.[319] This chapter elucidates what Rose meant by that assessment. It argues that Arendt's attempt to rework the concept of conscience is key to understanding why Rose critiqued Arendt as a beautiful soul and what Rose thought was at stake. The argument proceeds by summarizing how Arendt's work addresses the problem of conscience, that is, how conscience can be both formal and moral. This enables me to build up the case that Arendt's work provides an intellectual instantiation of the dilemmas of conscience, and of the temptation to represent the beautiful soul in response to those dilemmas. My contention is that familiarity with Hegel's cautionary tale would have helped Arendt anticipate that series of pitfalls.

---

[318] Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, trans. Richard Winston and Clare Winston (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 5.
[319] Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 155.

The first thing to see in order to proceed is why Arendt went to Jerusalem in 1961.

> Otto Adolf, son of Karl Adolf Eichmann and Maria nee Schefferling, caught in a suburb of Buenos Aires on the evening of May 11, 1960, flown to Israel nine days later, brought to trial in the District Court in Jerusalem on April 11, 1961, stood accused on fifteen counts: "together with others" he has committed crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime and especially during the period of the Second World War. ...To each count Eichmann pleaded: "Not guilty in the sense of the indictment." Throughout the trial, Eichmann tried to clarify, mostly without success… his plea of "not guilty in the sense of indictment." The indictment implied not only that he had acted on purpose, which he did not deny, but out of the base motives and in full knowledge of the criminal nature of his deeds. As for the base motives, he was perfectly sure that he was not what he called an *innerer Schweinehund*, a dirty bastard in the depths of his heart; and as for his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do–to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care.… Nobody believed him. The prosecutor did not believe, because that was not his job. Counsel for the defense paid no attention because he, unlike Eichmann, was, to all appearances, not interested in questions of conscience. And the judges did not believe him, because they were too good, and perhaps also too conscious of the very foundations of their profession, to admit that an average "normal" person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong. They preferred to conclude from occasional lies that he was a liar–and missed the greatest moral and even legal challenge of the whole case.[320]

When Hannah Arendt learned that the Israelis intended to try Eichmann in Jerusalem, she approached the editor of *The New Yorker*, William Shawn, about covering the trial. Arendt had established her reputation as a political theorist, not as a journalist, but she got the job and attended Eichmann's trial which ran from April 11 to August 14, 1961. Her report of the trial was published as a series of five articles, re-published as a book in 1963 entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Arendt had already gained attention as an original thinker for her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (published in 1951) on National Socialism and Stalinism and for *The Human Condition* (published in 1958), a study of the ways in which labor, work and action played out in modern political, social, public and private life. In these works, she sought to show how the horrors of the twentieth century affected our categories of moral and political judgment and sought to develop a new set of philosophical categories to illuminate the

[320] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 21, 25-6.

nature of political life. But it was this report that grabbed headlines, stirred up controversy and made her a household name.[321] As Benhabib succinctly wrote: "the Eichmann trial was a watershed of sorts because it brought to the fore the contradictions with which she had struggled with existentially and conceptually all her life."[322] The concept of conscience was one of those contradictions.

Eichmann, a traveling salesman, began dealing with "Jewish questions" for the Nazi regime two years after Hitler came to power in 1933. Rising through the ranks of the SS, he was entrusted with carrying out the "final solution," a goal of annihilation that he pursued with unrelenting bureaucratic zeal. There was no question that Eichmann had committed the crimes with which he had been charged, for he admitted his role in the Final Solution; however, for Arendt the trial of Eichmann raised troubling questions about moral judgment and motivation. It was unclear how to interpret Eichmann's protestations that he had not acted out of base motives and that he was unaware of the criminal nature of his acts. Arendt records that as far as Eichmann was concerned, he had never had any intentions to kill anybody; he had never hated Jews; and he had never done anything out of his initiative but always obeyed the law. Throughout the trial he presented himself as one driven to organize the mass murder of millions of Jewish men, women and children out of a sense of duty and not out of any sense of hatred or fanaticism. In doing his duty, he understood himself to be acting in good conscience and on the right side of the law.[323]

So, was Eichmann lying? The court assumed that only an utterly depraved villain could have committed such atrocities, but, according to Arendt, Eichmann was neither perverted nor sadistic. In fact, he was "terribly and terrifyingly normal."[324] In her court report Arendt stressed that Eichmann was not an Iago or a Macbeth:

---

[321] The public outrage to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that was stirred up did not simmer down until 22 November 1964 when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. For a good account of the controversy, see the biography written by her student Young-Bruehl and the recent graphic biography by Krimstein: Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 339, 47-53; Ken Krimstein, *The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt: A Tyranny of Truth* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2018).

[322] Seyla Benhabib, "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," in *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. D. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80.

[323] Arendt records that this led him to boast that "I will jump in my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews [or 'enemies of the Reich,' as he always claimed to have said] on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction." Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 46.

[324] Ibid., 276.

> Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing.[325]

Arendt reported that judges in Jerusalem simply could not accept that a normal person was incapable of telling right from wrong. They held that he must be aware of the criminal nature of his acts, and that the more plausible explanation was that he had lied to the police about his motives and had perjured himself in court when he claimed he had always obeyed orders.[326] In this way, the judges sidestepped what Arendt saw as the greatest moral and legal dilemma of the whole case, which was that Eichmann seemed to lack motivation to have committed the crimes.[327] Arendt's point is that the existing conception of guilt presumes that criminals must know at some basic level that what they are doing is wrong or unlawful. She argues that in putting Eichmann and other criminals who have committed 'legal crimes' on trial, we are demanding that "human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own judgment."[328] But if Eichmann did not realize what he had done was morally wrong, he lacked "the very thing our legal concept of guilt demands: *mensa rea*, or criminal intent."[329] The very fact that Eichmann claimed to have acted in good conscience and to have followed the law posed a profound problem.

Arendt referred to the central chapters of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as her report on Eichmann's conscience. In this report she aimed to take seriously both Eichmann's claim to have no base motives and his claim to have followed his conscience. It is significant to her project that Eichmann had not only committed a new kind of crime (organized genocide and crimes against humanity) but also presented us with a new type of criminal, who lacks the conventional motives we associate with evil doing. This new kind of criminal commits his crimes in a context which breaks down the capacity for forming independent moral judgments and "make[s] it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong."[330] Arendt's conclusion is that in the context of these regimes, enormous crimes do

[325] Ibid., 287.
[326] Ibid., 14, 26.
[327] Arendt concluded that "if the judges were more forthright, they would have simply admitted they 'judged freely,' declaring him guilty not on the basis of a guilty mind, but solely on the basis of his willful participation in the crimes." Ibid., 294.
[328] Ibid., 294-5.
[329] Ibid., 276-7.
[330] Ibid., 276.

not require evil perpetrators with wicked intentions, in fact such crimes might be committed for reasons that are petty or self-serving. For Arendt, the trial demonstrated that "it was sheer thoughtlessness–something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him [Eichmann] to become one of the greatest criminals of that period" and that "such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together."[331] This is the substance of Arendt's claim about the banality of evil. As one commentator elaborates, "Arendt's claim was not that such action was trivial but that souls generally go at bargain rates. Thirty shekels, another notch in the bureaucratic hierarchy–the things for which people are willing to betray everything that matters are appallingly insignificant."[332]

What grabbed Arendt's attention during the trial was Eichmann's total absence of thinking and what implications the inability to think had for the proper functioning of conscience.[333] The commonly held assumption that conscience referred to a normative experience, an experience of the good, now seemed naïve. The thoughtlessness Eichmann displayed demanded a new account of conscience. Arendt was spurred to return to a Socratic ethic in order to rework conscience and draw out the significance of thinking. In the process, Arendt came to the conclusion that conscience is "unpolitical," which set up the basis for Rose's critique.

The indictment of conscience

Arendt had written on conscience at the end of the 1920s in her doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Love in St. Augustine*. She read Augustine as treating conscience as the moral basis of judgment. Conscience is understood to be "of God" in Arendt's reading. It is the voice of God entering into one's mundane life, testifying from within us to the divine law. It issues particular commands of divine law, such as "Thou shalt not covet," which makes a claim

[331] Ibid., 287-88. Arendt believed Eichmman's unwillingness to think was his most distinctive trait: "He was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché…. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against words and the presence of others, and hence from reality as such." Ibid., 49.
[332] Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 301.
[333] Arendt continues to mull over these concerns in Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971): 418.

over and against the other possibilities one might will.[334] Hearing the voice of conscience leads to the discovery of one's true source in God, directing one beyond the world to which one was accustomed:

> Conscience directs man beyond this world and away from habituation. As the voice of the Creator, conscience makes man's dependence on God clear to him. What the law commands, conscience addresses to the one who had already succumbed to the world in habit. The voice of the law summons him against what habit previously entangled him in.… While man lives in habit, he lives in view of the world and is subject to its judgment. Conscience puts him *coram Deo*, into the presence of God.[335]

Hearing the voice of conscience reconciles us to God through grace and love, *caritas.* With *caritas* we can accept the help of God the Creator and do what the law commands out of love not out of fear.[336] *Caritas* not only changes a person's relationship to the law, it changes a person's relationship to the world: so that we are not lost in the world but know the good and perform the good by acting in concert with others.[337] There is more that needs to be said about Arendt's interpretation of *caritas* and "neighborly love" in her dissertation on Augustine. At this stage, I simply want to draw out the lineaments of the fairly traditional conception of conscience which she attributes to Augustine, so we can see why it had to be put in the dock for failing to prevent the evil Eichmann did in its name.

In this traditional conception of conscience, conscience serves as the moral basis of judgment. It is supposed to tell us to do good and avoid evil and to remind us of the moral commitments we have, by giving voice to divine commandments. But what if a person's conscience did not counsel him to do good and avoid evil, but counselled him to do evil? What if, instead of speaking the divine law to him from within saying, "Thou shall not kill," conscience said, "Thou shall kill"? Eichmann had testified in his defense that his conscience had not sanctioned resistance against evil, it demanded participation in it. Therefore, the question "in the minds of nearly everyone who followed the trial," Arendt reported, was whether the accused had a conscience at all. But could the faculty of conscience be missing in some people? How could it be absent in certain people or at times, given that conscience

[334] *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 84.
[335] Ibid., 84-5.
[336] Ibid., 91.
[337] Ibid., 90, 148.

is meant to be "always present within us just like consciousness?" [338] Arendt presumed that Eichmann did have a conscience, for he said he did.[339] The problem, as she saw it, was that his conscience did not operate in the "normal" fashion, given he was incapable of telling right from wrong.[340]

Arendt wanted to retain the idea of conscience as a faculty which counsels us to do good, so she reasoned that it must be rather precarious. She tried to establish whether Eichmann's conscience had been over-ridden by other considerations and circumstances which had silenced it, but she was not convinced Eichmann's conscience had been silenced, as he had testified that his conscience actually sanctioned his behavior and had continued to tell him what his duty was all the way to the end. So, if it was not right to speak of his conscience as having been muffled or silenced, then how had it ceased to function? Was it preferable to think of it as having been co-opted or incapacitated? The traditional view of what conscience was or how it functioned was no longer holding up for Arendt, and her concern was that neither ethics nor the legal framework had taken the failure of that view into account.

It was clear to Arendt that the socio-political conditions created by the Third Reich had had the effect of preventing the proper functioning of conscience:

> Just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody "Thou shalt not kill," even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: "Thou shalt kill," although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people.[341]

---

[338] Which is how she framed the question in her last book: *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), 190.

[339]Arendt is really stuck here. She does not want to say we possess a distinct human nature, but she thinks it is best to assume there is a human faculty which enables us to judge rationally and is not bound by standards and rules under which particular cases are simply subsumed. She was still going back and forth on the issue of whether everybody had a conscience in her 1968 essay "Collective Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. John Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 157. "The prejudices of jurisprudence that so often in perplexity appeal to conscience as something every sane man must have notwithstanding, the evidence is that quite a number of men have it, but by no means all, and that those who have it can be found in all walks of life and, more specifically, with all degrees of education and noneducation. No objective sign of social or educational standing can assure its presence or absence."

[340] *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 95.

[341] Ibid., 150.

What was unclear to her was how Eichmann's conscience functioned, or stopped functioning, under those conditions. Arendt struggled to see how conscience could be universal and actual, rehearsing the difficulties scholars have had conceiving of the normativity and formality of conscience, explored in previous chapters of this thesis. Nevertheless, her suspicion was that in a regime where murder was lawful, Eichmann's refusal to think or to judge for himself might offer the most significant clues for making sense of his enthusiastic participation in the crimes. Finding the connection between thinking, judging and conscience seemed the most promising way forward in terms of re-conceptualizing conscience. There were two portions of Eichmann's testimony that Arendt relied most heavily. In one of them Eichmann signaled that he had satisfied his conscience by listening to "respectable voices" and in the other he tried to explain that he had done his moral duty by following the law.

Respectable voices and the refusal to think or judge

At one point in Eichmann's testimony, he describes attending the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 as secretary, a gathering which aimed to coordinate the efforts of all Ministries and branches of the Civil Service in implementing the Final Solution. Before the meeting, Arendt records that he had still had some reservations about "such a bloody solution," despite having "done his best right along to help with [it]" but that those doubts were dispelled once "he could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears that not only Hitler, not only Heydrich or the 'sphinx' Muller, not just the S.S. or the Party, but the elite of the good old Civil Service were vying and fighting with each other for the honor of taking the lead in these 'bloody' matters."[342] Eichmann said that after witnessing the enthusiastic response of the "best" people, he no longer had any doubts and his conscience was satisfied. Arendt concludes that for Eichmann "the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience, was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final Solution."[343] When the prosecution tried to prove that there were other voices he could have listened to Eichmann could honestly claim that "there were no voices from the outside to arouse his conscience" once it had been set at ease by the unanimous agreement of his social betters.

[342] Ibid., 114.
[343] Ibid., 116.

Arendt's interpretation was that Eichmann "did not need to 'close his ears to the voice of conscience,' as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a 'respectable voice,' with the voice of respectable society around him."[344] But this raised further problems for her about Eichmann's motivation and his conscience. Conscience is supposed to put the individual *coram Deo*, in the presence of God, thereby freeing him from the prevailing social norms; however, Eichmann's conscience did not work like that. Arendt tries to make sense of his testimony in this way:

> What he fervently believed in up to the end was success, the chief standard of "good society" as he knew it.… Hitler, he said, "may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German Army to Führer of a people of almost eighty million…. His success alone proved to me that I should subordinate myself to this man." His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which "good society" everywhere reacted as he did.[345]

Instead of freeing him from social norms and directing him to speak out against the Final Solution, Eichmann said that his conscience counselled him to adopt the opinions of those around him. He testified that after hearing the views of his social betters, "I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt." Who was he to judge? Who was he "to have [his] own thoughts in this matter"?[346] Having heard the voice of conscience, Eichmann believed he could do nothing but yield to it. Arendt concluded that in the context of a regime where murder was lawful, if one does not think for oneself, it is all too easy to conflate the voice of conscience with respectable voices.

Following the law instead of thinking or judging

The other half of Eichmann's defense, in which he asserted that he has not only followed conscience, but also followed the law, was baffling as well. Arendt relays in her report that he told the police over and over that "whatever he did, as far as he could see, he did as a law-abiding citizen" and that "he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law."[347] Eichmann was not troubled by the temptation to do evil. He only seemed troubled by the temptation to disregard his duty as dictated by the law. On Arendt's analysis, Eichmann

[344] Ibid., 126.
[345] Ibid.
[346] Ibid., 114.
[347] Ibid., 135.

had deeply internalized the duties of a law-abiding citizen, and she hypothesized that the verdicts of his conscience were based on the law but understood in a particular way. Her report picks up on one strange turn the trial took:

> [Eichmann] suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty. This was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant's moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man's faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience. The examining officer did not press the point, but Judge Raveh, either out of curiosity or out of indignation at Eichmann's having dared to invoke Kant's name in connection with his crimes, decided to question the accused. And, to the surprise of everybody, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorial imperative.… [He] then proceeded to explain that from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles, that he had known it, and that he had consoled himself with the thought that he no longer "was master of his own deeds," that he was unable "to change anything." What he failed to point out in court was that in this "period of crimes legalized by the state," as he himself now called it, he had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read: Act as if the principles of your actions were the same as that of the legislator of the law of the land–or, as Hans Frank's formulation of "the categorial imperative in the Third Reich," which Eichmann might have known: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it." …Kant, to be sure, had never intended to say anything of the sort; on the contrary, to him every man was a legislator the moment he started to act: by using his "practical reason" man found the principles that could and should be the principles of law. But it is true that Eichmann's unconscious distortion agrees with what he himself called the version of Kant "for the household use of the little man."[348]

For Eichmann, morality had become synonymous with legality. As one commentator put it: "in a regime where the will of the Führer was indeed, both theoretically and practically, the source of law, this 'Kantian' reification of duty and law-abidingness was morally fatal. Eichmann was a law-abiding citizen of a regime which had made murder into a law, a legal (and thus "moral") obligation."[349] Eichmann was so committed to lawfulness, that is, following the will of the Führer completely, that he sabotaged Himmler's orders to stop the deportations towards the end of the war.[350] It was this strictness in cleaving to the law of the land that the judges in Jerusalem interpreted as definitive proof of Eichmann's anti-Semitic fanaticism. In doing so, Arendt says they missed the moral challenge of the case and "they never came to understand him," since "the very uncomfortable truth of the

[348] Ibid., 136-7.
[349] Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 51.
[350] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 146.

matter probably was that it was not his fanaticism but his very conscience that prompted him to adopt his uncompromising attitude during the last year of the war."[351] Arendt felt the court had failed to come up with an adequate account of Eichmann's guilt, and failed to appreciate that, as another commentator put it, "the greatest threat in our age may not be the criminal mastermind but the thoughtless, law-abiding citizen."[352] Again, in the context of a regime in which murder was legal, Arendt concluded that it was the refusal to think for oneself that allowed conscience to condone acting in accordance with those laws, and, in fact, use those laws as the metric for the moral law.

Passing sentence on conscience

Holding onto the notion of conscience as normative, informed by principles and directed by *caritas* to produce new forms of solidarity lead to intractable difficulties. To Arendt, it no longer made any sense. Arendt wrote that facing the moral challenge of the case head on required coming to terms with the traditional understanding of conscience and its total inadequacy in the context of criminal regimes. Coming to terms with the case meant letting go of the assumption that conscience functioned as a reliable, independent moral faculty that counsels us to do good and avoid evil, as Eichmann's did the reverse. It also meant letting go of the assumption that conscience is guided by old values, moral maxims and religious principles stemming from commandments such as "Thou shalt not kill," for under Hitler those principles had been inverted. Finally, it meant letting go of the notion that heeding conscience freed people from habituation to the world around them and conformity to its norms, providing a barrier against tyranny and totalitarianism, for National Socialism had created conditions of complicity which effectively incapacitated conscience and undermined moral agency.

Arendt had already begun to explore how Nazism created these conditions in her 1951 work *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*.[353] In that book, she talks of evil as radical but when confronted with the figure of Eichmann she, as Canovan said, "came to the conclusion that to speak of evil as something 'radical' was to credit it with a depth that it did not possess,

[351] Ibid.
[352] John Kiess, *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, Philosophy and Theology (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 70.
[353] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2017), 425.

which is why after the trial she drew attention to evil's 'banality' instead."[354] Eichmann had become for her the "paradigm case for analyzing how neither particularly evil nor particularly intelligent people could get caught in the machinery of evil and commit the deeds they did."[355] Holding that paradigm in mind, Arendt began working on material that would form the basis of a new understanding of conscience.

Conscience re-worked

Arendt's new understanding of conscience has to be assembled from a number of different lines of investigation she pursued over the next fifteen years, but it can be seen taking shape across a range of lectures, essays and publications she produced up until the time of her death.[356] In her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt asked: "Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty of telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?"[357] In the trial she had witnessed how Eichmann's unthinking attitude precluded judging and blocked his ability to discriminate between good and evil. So could thinking liberate the faculty of judgment enabling us to tell what is right from what is wrong? Arendt sought to find out whether conscience, if linked more closely to thinking and judging for oneself, could help avoid moral catastrophe in dark times. Her goal, as she later reflected, was to examine the experience of thinking in order to explore the "inner connection between the ability or inability to think and the problem of evil."[358] In what follows, the connections she saw between thinking, judging and conscience are drawn out so that the weaknesses of her new account of conscience can be assessed and the basis of Rose's critique becomes evident.

---

[354] As she explained, "It is my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can over grow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is 'thought-defying', as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That it its 'banality.'" Hannah Arendt et al., *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 209. Richard J. Bernstein, "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?" in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, 301-2. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24. As Arendt later wrote, "The greatest evil is not radical, it has no roots, and because it has no roots it has no limitations, it can go to unthinkable extremes and sweep over the whole world." Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 95.

[355] Benhabib, "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," 68.

[356] While it has a definite shape, Arendt's treatment of conscience is still of contradictions and loose ends. Synthesizing Arendt's work on conscience has required following a quite a few different "thought trains," to use Canovan's expression. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 6.

[357] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 5.

[358] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 166.

Thinking without bannisters

In light of the trial, Arendt called for a new kind of thinking that could liberate judgment, foster the formation of conscience and sustain political life. She envisioned thinking as a 'weapon' that could push back against oppressive forces.[359] This kind of thinking would be an imaginative activity that required remembering and was able to draw from stories and examples with creativity. It would require "no pillars and props, no standards and traditions to move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain."[360] Arendt termed this new kind of thinking *Denken ohne Geländer*–thinking without banisters.

Her focus was not on thinking understood as the activity of philosophers or 'professional thinkers' but on thinking as an activity open to everybody.[361] This kind of thinking she has is mind is an internal dialogue, "the encounter of the self with itself." Arendt took Socrates as her model for thinking, for Socrates exemplified thinking as a dialogue with oneself. Two passages from the *Gorgias* and one from *Hippias* were central to the account she was developing of this internal dialogue and to her efforts to delineate its relationship with judgment and conscience.[362]

In the passages from the *Gorgias*, Socrates has failed to convince others by reasoned arguments but retains an unshaken conviction that he is right even though the whole world stands against him. In that context, Arendt reads Socrates as asserting that "it is much better to be in disagreement with the whole world than being one [with the whole world] to be in disagreement with myself."[363] The possibility of being in disagreement with oneself reveals the self to be "two-in-one." This is true not only in the sense that whatever I do I am at the same time aware of doing it, Arendt writes, but also "in the very specific and active sense of this silent dialogue… of being on speaking terms."[364] So thinking is an activity of asking

---

[359] Richard J. Bernstein, "Arendt on Thinking," in *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. D. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 278. Bernstein, 278

[360] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970), 10.

[361] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 191. Arendt insists that thinking is not "a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty in everybody; by the same token, inability to think is not a failing of the many who lack brain power, but an ever present possibility for everybody."

[362] She analyzed these two passages in the fragment "Philosophy and Politics," (1954). [NB. Later published as *The Promise of Politics*], "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," (1965) and in "Thinking and Moral Considerations," (1971). She also elaborated on them in her Gifford Lecturers (delivered between 1972 and 1974) which formed the basis of her last work, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), which was unfinished at the time of her death.

[363] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 18.

[364] "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 91.

and answering in which I converse with myself. To put it another way, thinking is dialogical and when thinking I am both the one who asks and the one who answers.[365] Given that I am two-in-one, I can either be in agreement with myself or disagreement.

Socrates claims it is better for him to be in disagreement with the whole world than to be in disagreement with myself, on Arendt's reading, because "if I disagree with other people, I can walk away; but I cannot walk away from myself, and therefore I better first try to be in agreement with myself before I take all others into consideration."[366] Arendt makes use of a passage from *Hippias Major* to substantiate this. Socrates tells Hippias, who has proved to be unthinking, "how blissfully fortunate" he is to go home and find himself alone, perfectly able to live with himself. By comparison, when Socrates returns home, although he is alone, he finds he must keep company with a very obnoxious fellow "who always cross-examines" him.[367] And Socrates has to find a way of living in accord with him.

Arendt considers this kind of thinking fundamentally important but not unavoidable. If you do not want to start thinking, avoiding that internal dialogue is as simple as making sure you never go home and examine things.[368] Arendt explains just how straightforward a life without thinking would be, about which she writes:

> This is not a matter of wickedness or goodness, and it is not a matter of intelligence or stupidity. A person who does not know that silent intercourse (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment…. Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers.[369]

Eichmann was one such sleep-walker, an unthinking man who avoided the self-questioning dialogue of conscience.[370] For those who are willing to think, engaging in the thought process depends upon being able to spend time in your own company, which requires

---

[365] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 185.
[366] *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 89.
[367] "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," 443.
[368] Ibid., 444; *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 190-1.
[369] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 191.
[370] Arendt does not explain how it could be that Eichmann's conscience was never activated, as he had testified that he had followed his conscience. Perhaps she meant that because he was unthinking, his true conscience was never activated and that he was in fact perjuring himself when he claimed to have followed his conscience. There is nothing to suggest she would have subscribed to the notion of a true conscience or how she would have squared this problem. Perhaps she had Heidegger not Eichmann in mind when she wrote of unthinking sleepwalkers.

solitude. [371] At times Arendt casts this in terms of friendship, for solitude is what makes it possible for us to befriend ourselves and this is a precondition of befriending others. She writes that "only someone who has had the experience of talking with himself is capable of being a friend, of acquiring another self. The condition is that he be of one mind with himself, in agreement with himself." [372] Avoiding self-contradiction is of fundamental importance here. A person who contradicts himself undermines his friendships with others because somebody who contradicts himself is unreliable.[373] So the possibility of acting in a way that puts me at odds with myself should provoke me to stop and think.[374]

In the account Arendt develops, the thought process is a safeguard against doing what is wrong, or even a weapon to employ against prevailing norms. Where thinking causes me to question whether a given action would put me at odds with myself, the mind's internal dialogue is likely to put limits on what I will do. The desire to avoid internal conflict will prevent me from doing certain things, even when everyone around me is doing them. In this way, it will enable me to resist certain political evils.[375] Arendt holds that a person like Hippias, who does not think, "will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment."[376]

Arendt maintains that the Socratic formula, "It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong," should be placed alongside the criterion of having to live with yourself. This generates an interior moral principle that can be distinguished from legal ones, because it is indexed only to the individual and his own standard: being able to live with himself by avoiding self

---

[371] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 100. Arendt adds that "no man can keep his conscience intact who cannot actualize the dialogue with himself, that is, who lacks the solitude required for all forms of thinking." However, the conditions of totalitarianism undermined the possibility of a person having that minimum amount of solitude. "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2004): 442.

[372] "Philosophy and Politics," 437.

[373] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 186.

[374] "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 105.

[375] Arendt writes: "If he is a thinking being, rooted in his thoughts and remembrances, and hence knowing that he has to live with himself, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do, and these limits will not be imposed on him from outside, but will be self-set. These limits can change considerably and uncomfortably from person to person, from country to country; but limitless, extreme evil is only possible where these self-grown roots, which automatically limit the possibilities, are entirely absent." Ibid., 101.

[376] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 191.

contradiction.[377] The question "What ought I to do?" is thereby clarified by the question "What kind of company do I want to keep?"[378] She explains:

> The criterion of right and wrong, the answer to the question, what ought I to do? depends in the last analysis neither on habits and customs, which I share with those around me, nor on a command of either divine or human origin, but on what I decide with regard to myself. In other words, I cannot do certain things, because having done them I shall no longer be able to live with myself. This living-with-myself is more than consciousness, more than the self-awareness that accompanies me in whatever I do and in whichever state I am. To be with myself and to judge by myself is articulated and actualized in the process of thought, and every thought process is an activity in which I speak with myself about whatever happens to concern me.[379]

The one waiting for us at the end of the day

In the account Arendt developed from those Socratic texts, conscience is the anticipation of the presence of someone who waits for me with reproaches when I come home at the end of the day.[380] Thinking actualizes the internal dialogue of me and myself which is given in consciousness, and it produces conscience as a by-product.[381] Therefore, what thinking generates is not knowledge but the ability to tell right from wrong.[382] The only criterion conscience provides, by which I can evaluate my action, is that if I want to be at home with myself, then I should act in a way that makes it easier to live with the silent partner within me. That means taking care not to do anything that would make it impossible for us to maintain harmony. In thinking about my words and deeds, what matters is whether I shall be able to live with myself in peace.[383] So the inner principle of conscience is "never act in a way that afterwards you can no longer be your own friend and enjoy your own company." If what I fear most, or ought to fear most, is the presence of this partner to whom I must give an account of my actions, then Socratic conscience is the experience of having a bad conscience, for conscience is the experience of contradiction.[384]

---

[377] "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 109.
[378] Ibid., 145-6. "I tried to show that our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives."
[379] Ibid., 97-8.
[380] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 190-1.
[381] Ibid., 193.
[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid., 191.
[384] "Philosophy and Politics," 440-1.

In committing oneself to thinking, I am committing myself to staying loyal to what conscience, the by-product of thinking, upholds as right and wrong, and taking it upon myself to act according to my own standard only. It is crucial to Arendt that conscience does not tell me what to do. What it tells me is "do not contradict yourself," so that I know, "I'd rather suffer than to do that." While conscience says what to avoid in my dealings with others, it gives no positive indications for my conduct. In other words, conscience is empty, or formal, in that it has no moral content. Arendt maintains this formalism by insisting that conscience does not create values and that "it will not find out, once and for all, what 'the good' is."[385] While conscience is morally empty, it is still normative on Arendt's account, by virtue of taking harmony with myself as its sole standard for telling right from wrong. So, we can still talk of conscience as conditioning us against wrong-doing–and this is what is of importance to Arendt–even when all other moral principles have been supplanted.

> The total moral collapse of respectable society during the Hitler regime may teach us that under such circumstances those who cherish values and hold fast to moral norms and standards are not reliable: we now know that moral norms and standards can be changed overnight, and that all that then will be left is the mere habit of holding fast to something. Much more reliable will be the doubters and skeptics, not because skepticism is good or doubting wholesome, but because they are used to examine things and to make up their own minds. Best of all will be those who know only one thing for certain: that whatever else happens, as long as we live, we shall have to live together with ourselves.[386]

Conscience, so conceived, has the advantage of making us more morally reliable by moving us from the position where we say, "I ought not to" (a position which does not prevent us from acting against that knowledge) to the position where we say, "I can't," and stand firm. As one commentator explained, "Arendt became convinced that no one who possessed the sort of personal conscience that goes with the habit of thinking would be carried along so unquestioningly by the trends of the times, or have fulfilled with such robot-like precision the appalling demands of Eichmann's bureaucratic function."[387] With the connections Arendt draws between thinking and conscience, now in place, we can turn to Arendt's discussions of moral judgment to fill out how she envisions conscience functioning.

---

[385] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, Vol. 1, 191-2.
[386] "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment,* ed. Jerome Kohn (Berlin: Schocken, 2003), 45.
[387] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 177.

Arendt conceives of conscience as connected not only with thinking but with making moral judgments, that is to say, with the judgments about right and wrong that lead to moral action. Thinking generates the soundless dialogue of conscience and is what enables us to "judge freely." The thought process, with its continuous questioning, dispenses with established criteria. In liberating us from the accepted rules of conduct, it gives us the opportunity to judge for ourselves. Arendt characterizes the thought process as liberating me to judge freely, by enabling me to form a general opinion by judging on the basis of the particular case itself, without the aid of universals[388] Piecing together Arendt's line of reasoning, Maurizio D'entreves explains: "It is not that thinking provides judgment with new rules for subsuming the particular under the universal. Rather, it loosens the grip of the universal over the particular, thereby releasing judgment from ossified categories of thought and conventional standards of behavior."[389] Therefore one who thinks will be less liable to be carried away by the opinions of the majority.

With this view of the operation of conscience in mind, judging freely might prevent catastrophes in exceptional circumstances. At least in times of crisis when "standards are no longer valid anyhow."[390] Arendt clarifies that judging freely "seems to operate only in emergencies, in those exceptional moments where individuals, faced with the collapse of traditional standards, must come up with new ones and judge according to their own autonomous values."[391] Only then does judging freely come to the fore: "When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous."[392]

In addition to judging freely, Arendt also writes of another kind of moral judgment that is not restricted to moments of crisis. In this mode of judging, I form an opinion by considering

---

[388] Hensen clarifies that for Arendt political judgments are actually free in two senses: we are free to discover general rules under which particular can be fitted and because they seek but do not compel general assent. Phillip Hansen, "Individual Responsibility and Political Authority Hannah Arendt at the Intersection of Moral and Political Philosophy," in *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, ed. Anna Yeatman, et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 137.
[389] Maurizio Passerin D'entreves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment," in *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 248-9.
[390] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 106., Cf. *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 193.
[391] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 192.
[392] Ibid.

a given issue from different viewpoints, making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent. I represent those standpoints when I make what she calls a "representative judgment."[393] Arendt proposes that representative judgment works in this fashion: "the more people's positions I can make present in my thought and hence take into account in my judgment, the more representative it will be."[394]

Arendt associates this capacity to judge from the standpoint of everyone else with having an "enlarged mentality," adopting the terminology that Kant used to characterize aesthetic judgment in his Third Critique.[395] On her account, enlarged thought is best realized through discussion and debate. In order to "think from the perspective of everyone else," we need to know how to listen to what others are saying. I can enlarge my perspective by listening to as many people as possible, even those whose voices are absent, and dialoguing with them, but this requires imagination. I need to be able to imagine how I would feel in someone else's specific situation and to imagine how they might view it.[396] She writes that there is a need to "train your imagination to go visiting."[397] To go visiting is to think outside your own experience. It involves deliberately trying to understand the needs and interests of others, by envisioning how they experience the world and by imagining how they might perceive your actions. In this way thinking outside your own experiences enlarges your mentality.

Arendt's objective in introducing the idea of having an enlarged mentality is to bring the contextual judgment that attends to particulars into alignment with a universal moral standpoint.[398] She holds that thinking with an enlarged mentality permits us make judgments that are not merely subjective but intersubjective.[399] So although judgment

---

[393] *Between Past and Future*, ed. Jerome Kohn (London: Penguin, 2006), 237.
[394] "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 141.
[395] Ibid., 137.
[396] Arendt wants to distinguish enlarged mentality from empathy, which she understands more narrowly. Empathy involves trying to feel as someone else feels, whereas enlarging your mentality means imagining the feelings *and* thoughts of other people. Arendt "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century. Lecture Notes. The New School for Social Research. Series: Subject File, 1949-1975," *The Hannah Arendt Papers* (1968), https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/series.html.)
[397] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, Appendix: Judging, 257.
[398] Seyla Benhabib, "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought," *Political Theory* 16, no. 1 (1988): 32, 44.
[399] Ibid., 39-40.

depends upon thinking, which is an internal dialogue, thinking also involves putting oneself in the place of another to take their perspectives into account.[400]

Assessing Arendt's account of conscience

Arendt re-worked conscience by linking it to thinking and judging for oneself. It was her attempt to respond to the crimes that Eichmann had perpetrated, supposedly in accord with his conscience, as a result of what appeared to be his thoughtlessness and unwillingness to judge right from wrong. Reworking the concept of conscience, as she did, was meant to emphasize its formalism, in that conscience arose out of dialogical self-reflection as a formal principle for maintaining inner harmony. Conscience would not tell you what the good is or help you find it.[401] Nevertheless, Arendt also tried to preserve the normativity of conscience in that it enjoined acting in such a way as to maintain that inner harmony and refuse self-contradiction in one's thinking, which might put limits on what one would be willing to do. Arendt tied thinking and judging together in her account of conscience to constrain action in political situations where traditional moral principles had collapsed. Heeding my internal dialogue partner to whom I must give an account of my actions would enable me to draw independent judgments about right and wrong. As an internal moral principle, conscience is meant to be able to move me from the position where I think, "I ought not to" to the position where I say definitively, "I can't" and not be swept along with the crowd.

Nevertheless, Arendt's account is unsatisfactory on three fronts. First, her account of conscience is not sufficiently normative and her claim that a principled moral standpoint could emerge out of the self's desire for unity is not persuasive. It is an unwarranted assumption that merely spending time with myself thinking and living in my own presence will be sufficient to put limits on what I will allow myself to do. Second, Arendt's depiction

[400] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 241. Arendt's work on reflective judgment is inconclusive. Some wonder whether Arendt might have used reflective judgment to underwrite a universal procedural ethic and then gone on to develop a political ethic. I am not convinced that judgment, even enlarged judgment, alone can provide a sufficient political culture to form and sustain conscience. A taste of the discussion can be found in: Marguerite La Caze, "The Miraculous Power of Forgiveness and the Promise," in *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, ed. Anna Yeatman, et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001); Steve Buckler, "Ethics and the Vocation of Politics," Ibid., ed. A. Yeatman, et al. (2011). Benhabib, "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought," 125; Buckler, "Ethics and the Vocation of Politics." 125.
[401] Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," 445.

of moral acts as intellectual decisions or judgments is not satisfactory. Without having given due consideration to the way virtues, character and practices shape our knowledge of what is to be done, her conclusion that good people are those who think or who live in harmony with themselves fails to convince. Finally, Arendt's account is predicated on a problematic distinction between morality and politics that relegates them to different spheres. Arendt is reluctant to give conscience a place in a shared world and pushes it from the public into the private sphere denying it any chance to obtain an intersubjective dimension.

Arendt's account is not sufficiently normative

Arendt formulated conscience as an inner moral principle of harmony, but it remains insufficiently normative. There is no reason to think that concern about the company one keeps and threat of internal dissonance set sufficient limits on what a person would do. [402] Kampowski points to the issue at hand by raising the question "What if Eichmann were to respond to the charges brought against him that he would not mind living with a murderer?" [403] After all, one of Eichmann's characteristics that Arendt found most perplexing was precisely that he seemed at home with himself and claimed to be following his conscience, as Benhabib reminds us.[404] While Arendt's account of conscience might allow a person's practical principles to become truly interior, those practical principles may still be very wrong.[405] Mary McCarthy and Seyla Benhabib are right to question whether Arendt has assumed too quickly that a principled moral standpoint could emerge out of the self's desire for unity and consistency.[406] Arendt's theses about thoughtlessness and living with oneself do not on their own account for the idea that some ordinary people become complicit in evil while others do not.

Part of the problem is that Arendt did not want to work within the framework of morality based on norms. Universal norms and traditional moral imperatives were far from stable

[402] Hansen asks: "But is it not the case that I refrain from murder, because I do not want to harm another, rather than because I have to live with myself?" Hansen, "Individual Responsibility and Political Authority: Hannah Arendt at the Intersection of Moral and Political Philosophy," in *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, ed. Anna Yeatman, et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001) 137.
[403] Stephan Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 104.
[404] Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 190.
[405] Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*, 118.
[406] Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 190.

on her view, and the events of the thirties and forties had witnessed to this.[407] Arendt frequently observed that "almost overnight and with scarcely any resistance the traditional commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' was transformed into a new imperative, 'Thou shalt kill for the sake of the Führer.'"[408] Not only had the traditional moral commands and traditional moral imperatives given way, they had been replaced "with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people."[409] Far better, then, to proceed without bannisters.

Arendt also distrusted traditional moral imperatives, because it seemed to her that what people believed to be true regarding God, the good and human nature had little impact on what they actually do. She claimed that what was of most importance was that people acted right, not that people believed the right things. As she wrote, "knowledge of ultimates about God or man or moral truths–can easily remain external to the person and his deeds, so that it does not immediately influence a person's behavior; it does not as such keep someone from committing evil."[410] For that reason she held, as Kampowski put it, that "if 'ultimates' are necessary to prevent moral catastrophes, we are heading for disaster."[411]

Arendt is therefore wary of traditional morality, with its universal norms that could be applied to individual concrete cases, because she believed norms where neither stable, nor God-given. Moreover, norms were too extrinsic to effectively guide conduct. Arendt maintains that we must act and judge without divine commandments or the guarantee of divinely underwritten moral rules that will determine our judgments unfailingly. The task is to think, judge and act without such supports. This is how Canovan depicts Arendt's position:

> She was convinced that religious authority no longer existed and that philosophy could not fill its place. In this situation, the danger of moral nihilism was immense, but it did not seem to her to be inescapable.… Authority as a concept and as an institution had had a beginning (in Roman political experience) as well as an end in

[407] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 52.
[408] Bernstein draws this from some of her unpublished letters, but Arendt frequently discussed the overnight collapse of self-evident principles and moral commands. See: Ibid., 50. "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," 436; Bernstein, "Arendt on Thinking," 284; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 177.
[409] "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 43. *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 177.
[410] "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 78.
[411] Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*, 109.

> the twentieth century. This meant that although it might be very difficult to manage without authoritative traditions and rules, human beings had done this before.… Arendt took comfort from the fact that since action and judgment had been possible before the establishment of the great Western trinity of religion, tradition and authority, these same human capacities must still be available after its collapse.[412]

Arendt argued that we could still develop the capacity to judge, even if we do not have rules handed down from on high, by learning to judge particulars without subsuming them to general rules. Thinking liberates judgment by clearing a space. The Socratic dialogue that I carry on with myself, when I think, challenges rules that are assumed to be true and clears a space by removing the primary obstacle to apprehending the particulars of concrete cases: the rules and values that are taken as given. Kampowski indicates that here Arendt sees a "danger involved with people being so used to simply applying universal rules to concrete cases that they begin to care more about having rules than about what these rules actually say."[413] So in order for "the particular to become real to him, a person needs to liberate himself form the sway of the universal–taken to be unexamined opinions, values, or norms–which may blur the particular's realness for him."[414] As Arendt saw it, universals are abstract entities detached from reality that "are to be respected because they are the rules and not because they are protecting a specific concrete good."[415] Rather than relying on universals, Arendt proposed that we attend to particulars, arguing that it was better to dispense with universals and focus on concrete reality. "The best we can do is to make judgments on the basis of the situation we find ourselves in, trying not to allow our judgment to be distorted by maxims and rules that are not appropriate."[416]

Arendt's distrust of traditional morality with its universal norms leads her to invest all of conscience's normativity in the inner principle of harmony and to the act of judging what to do in any particular context without norms or principles to guide those judgments. This displacement of the normative dimension in Arendt's account of conscience is disturbing. To some, it makes conscience sound self-interested.[417] Others worry that "the thinking

---

[412] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*.173-4
[413] Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*, 121.
[414] Ibid.
[415] Ibid., 123.
[416] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 189.
[417] Katab understands Arendt to be saying that what founds or justifies the norm, "Thou shall not kill" is nothing other than the pain of self-reproach. George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Lanham: Rowman & Allanheld, 1987), 101-3.

attitude cannot prescribe any concrete measures regarding particular courses of action, and that the best it can provide is a general, vague even, sense of openness and respect for humanity."[418] Arendt fails to make the case that spending time thinking in solitude would be sufficient to put limits on what I will allow myself to do.

Arendt's account does not consider the role of character and virtue

Arendt's account of conscience is premised on the idea that "thinking makes us moral."[419] But thinking in and of itself does not seem sufficient to explain why some people choose good over evil and others do not. Arendt does not consider how having strengths and weaknesses and certain dispositions of character might shape an individual's moral judgments; she dismisses virtues and habits as if they restrained the will's capacity for freedom and spontaneity.[420] Because Arendt was unable to see moral acts as anything other than intellectual decisions, she did not entertain "the alternative hypothesis that Eichmann's failure may have been one of lack of feeling (empathy) rather than lack of thinking."[421] To put it differently, thoughtlessness might be more often the result of vice than the cause of it, as Kampowski suggests. [422] A theory of conscience which factors in the role the virtues and vices play in moral knowledge is in a better position to account for the phenomena of thoughtlessness. In depicting conscience as an interiorized moral principle, Arendt construes the central question of morality as a matter of who we wish to be and with whom we wish to spend our lives. Yet I cannot ask what kind of person I wish to be independently of the question of my character and disposition. As Kampowski reminds us, "How we perceive practical matters depends on who we are, and who we are depends not only on the capacity of our minds but also on the presence or absence of virtuous dispositions.… In the same way in which the virtues sharpen our view of the good, so the vices can dim it to the point of making us completely blind to it."[423]

---

[418] Deirdre L. Mahony, *Hannah Arendt's Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 106.
[419] Ibid., 209.
[420] Arendt seems to think that virtues and habits would limit possibilities for natality. Suzanne D. Jacobitti, "Thinking About the Self," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 207.
[421] Arne Johan Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 5 (2001): 9.
[422] Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*, 117.
[423] Ibid., 115.

Arendt's failure to see moral acts as anything other than intellectual decisions is especially glaring, because she so clearly understood that totalitarianism took hold not because of the acceptance of certain ideas but because of the establishment of certain practices.[424] Nevertheless, she does not consider the way virtue, character, and stable dispositions might influence our knowledge of what is to be done or affectively dispose us towards the good. Nor does she explore how they shape the way conscience is formed and exercised. Without some consideration of virtue or character, it is very hard for her to show that good people are those who think. All she can do is "guide us to the conclusion that the good among us are those to whom evil is intuitively unthinkable and who therefore lack the capacity to become complicit in it. And the basis of the distinction between these virtuous few and the rest of us remains enigmatic and impenetrable."[425]

It is not that Arendt has nothing to say about the virtues, because she certainly esteems courage and gratitude, even if she does not see them as virtues,[426] or that she has nothing to say about practices, as she singles out promise-making and forgiveness for having particular significance, even if she does not see them as practices.[427] My point is that the virtues and practices that matter to Arendt–courage, gratitude, promise-making and forgiveness–are those which she identifies as features of the public realm.[428] These moral precepts are appropriate to political action to the extent that they create favorable conditions for people to live together in the world, reflecting her hope in the world's plurality, and that they create favorable conditions for people to begin human relations anew, reflecting her hope in the world's natality. Arendt explains:

> In so far as morality is more than the sum total of mores, of customs and standards of behavior solidified through tradition and valid on the ground of agreements, both of which change with time, it has, at least politically, no more to support itself than the good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them. These moral precepts are the only ones that are not applied to action from the outside, from supposedly higher faculty or from experiences outside action's own reach. They arise, on the contrary, directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking.[429]

---

[424] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 23.
[425] Mahony, *Hannah Arendt's Ethics*, 208.
[426] Arendt sees courage is a sentiment and gratitude is a principle.
[427] Arendt views promise-making and forgiveness as principles.
[428] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 22-78.
[429] Ibid., 124-5.

Arendt's belief is that the only precepts appropriate to politics are the ethical practices, principles and considerations which emerge from within the activity of politics itself, not those that are derived from supposedly eternal principles.[430] The issue here is that Arendt sees morality and politics as two distinct spheres, and it is of importance to her that the former does not impinge on the later.[431] But having cordoned off the sphere of morality from the sphere of politics, Arendt is left without the resources to explore how social and political practices (and institutions) shape moral decisions, and she is left without the means to say how ethical consideration might guide and constrain political actions–the exception being the limit that individual conscience might place on one's behavior in exceptional political circumstances. To put it plainly, Arendt's conception of conscience is seriously weakened because it is abstracted from political ethics.

Arendt's account banishes conscience from the city

Arendt's treatment of conscience is embedded in a set of distinctions designed to separate morality and politics, as she sees moral standards of conduct and political standards of conduct belonging to wholly different spheres.[432] Although personal morality and political action are both informed by principles, goodness and political action exclude each other. Personal morality is concerned with relations between private persons or with the relation of a person to himself; political action is concerned with the public world. In the moral realm individuals follow the silent prompts of conscience which issue non-negotiable demands, whereas in the political realm a plurality of actors argues about what is to be done. If the political realm is characterized by the life of the world and by action in it, then the sphere of the moral realm is characterized by the life of the mind and the solitude that thinking requires. Morality is motivated by concern for the self and its integrity, whereas politics depends upon assuming shared responsibility. The focus of morality is the good man while the focus of politics is the good citizen.

---

[430] Dana Villa, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.

[431] On Arendt's determination to keep morality out of politics, see Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*. Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*. Buckler, "Ethics and the Vocation of Politics." Francis X. Winters, "The Banality of Virtue: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Reinterpretation of Political Ethics," in *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987). Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 197-240.

[432] This distinction between private realm and the and authentically public realms laid out in *The Human Condition*, and forms part of her critique of modern society. Arendt, *The Human Condition: Second Edition*, 22-78.

Having drawn a line between personal morality and politics, Arendt places the Socratic proposition on one side ("It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong") and its political response on the other ("What is important in the world is that there be no wrong…. Never mind who suffers it; your duty is to prevent it.")[433] Conscience, whether it is conceived along Christian or Socratic lines, must be kept in the sphere of personal morality.[434] Arendt holds that Christian conscience does not belong in the sphere of the public world, because it speaks the voice of the law which shows me the way leading beyond the world. To use Arendt's often quoted phrase, Christian conscience, and the *caritas* it engenders, make "a desert of the world."[435] Arendt holds that Socratic conscience does not belong in the sphere of the public world either because its sole criterion, "I must not act in any way that makes it difficult to live with myself," also puts the focus on the self and its integrity. In both conceptions, she saw the concern of conscience to be the individual, his inner world of ideas and experiences and the solitude he required for introspection. Conscience in both conceptions pulls us away from concerns about the affairs of the world and weakens our commitment to it. It provides no motivation to get outside of ourselves and no motivation to engage with the others. As such, conscience is incapable of promoting solidarity. Construing conscience in this way drains it of any political power it might have obtained.[436] Arendt's description of a person of conscience helps explain why she separated conscience and politics:

> He is characteristically interested only in not doing wrong, in not transgressing certain limits. In the absence of atrocity or its possibility, he remains inactive. As a citizen, he rarely acts; and when he acts, all he does is say no, and then carry through on that response as economically as possible. Withdrawing from wrongdoing, he does not organize resistance to it.[437]

As Arendt sees him, the person of conscience is primarily interested in avoiding the taint of wrong; he is not "interested in the world where the wrong is committed or in the consequences the wrong will have for the future course of the world."[438] In a liberal democracy, following conscience might motivate you to be a good person by keeping clear of wrong-doing, but it would not motivate you to be a good citizen, who worked to prevent

---

[433] "Collective Responsibility," 153.
[434] For a close examination of her discussion of Christian absolute morality and Socratic absolute morality, and their relationship to politics, see Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil.*
[435] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 85-91.
[436] "Civil Disobedience," in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 60-1.
[437] Ibid., 62-3.
[438] Ibid., 60-61.

the wrong that others might suffer. Arendt criticized the mindset that sought to obtain exemption from society's ills instead of improving conditions in society, arguing that this is the consciousness of a moral purist not a political activist.[439] As long as a person believes his only obligation is to be true to his own subjective sense of right and wrong, his conscience will "not say, with Thomas Jefferson, 'I tremble for my country'…because it trembles for the individual self and its integrity."[440]

Having separated morality and politics and situated conscience on the side of private revelation rather than on the side of political action, Arendt can treat conscience as largely irrelevant within functioning liberal democracies. She sought to persuade Americans that they should not dissent on the basis of conscience but instead exercise a right to public dissent by participating in civil disobedience. She argued that the civil disobedience practiced during the Civil Rights Movement and in the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations constituted genuine political action, because citizens were making a concerted effort to act on questions of public interest. They were meeting their obligations as citizens by consulting others (engaging in dialogue and discussion) about their shared responsibilities and not simply consulting their consciences privately.[441] Arendt argued that Socrates and his American heir, Thoreau, modelled individual conscience not civil disobedience. Canovan explains that "like Socrates, who believed that to suffer wrong was better than to do it, Thoreau refused to be a party to injustice, and was prepared to accept the old adage about letting justice be done even if the world perishes."[442] In comparison these dissidents engaged in civil disobedience were genuine political actors, who intervened in public life through joint public violation of the laws in order to change the life of the community.[443] Arendt argued that when conscientious objectors reduced their moral intervention to the assertion of an individual will, their dissent from the current moral order amounts to little more than tacit consent.

---

[439] She summed up the political function of conscience, by calling it "the ethics of impotence" in her "New School Lectures on Basic Moral Propositions." Winters, "The Banality of Virtue: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Reinterpretation of Political Ethics," 205.
[440] Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," 60-61. Italics hers.
[441] *The Human Condition: Second Edition*, 184.
[442] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 183.
[443] This claim is part of Arendt's larger argument in favor of revolutionary acts and of legalizing civil disobedience. Other acts that met her standards for genuine politics include the founding of constitutions and participation in revolutionary council governments.

Arendt was opposed to attempts to complicate the distinctions she drew between the moral and political spheres. She argued that the motivations, concerns and experiences that pertained to the moral sphere were, by nature, private ones that could not be admitted into the political sphere. That is not simply because she considered them inappropriate to a political context. In a public context, they also have the potential to be destructive. Arendt sees the life of goodness and virtue, with its moral demands, as liable to cause people to neglect the priorities of politics. Canovan explains: "The greatest temptation for those recoiling from radical evil was to retreat into personal relations, where morality seemed relatively clear, and to take one's political cues from there. But attempts to publicize and generalize private experiences could be disastrous, because personal morality, concerned with one's relation to one's self and to one's neighbors, did not include concerns for the establishment and survival of sound political institutions, which alone could stand against totalitarianism."[444] It is not just that conscience is self-interested.[445] The danger is that conscience is prone to single-track thinking and, as Canovan says, "in the absence of genuinely pluralistic public discourse we can neither have a firm grip on reality nor any guarantee of political sanity."[446] But by purging morality from politics and politics from morality, Arendt denied conscience any way of surmounting its personal nature or of challenging single-track thinking, for conscience without a social or political dimension is conscience without an intersubjective dimension. In Hegel's terminology, there is no scope for mutual recognition.

This lack of mutual recognition is disappointing for two reasons. First it is disappointing because of the central place Arendt gives to human plurality and its implications, for instance that "human affairs are in constant flux from the continual irruption of new initiatives and new ideas; it means that each individual is unique, and suffers the consequent pathos of morality…being plural, human beings can gather to form a space amongst themselves, and in that space can see their common world from different points of view and therefore talk about their common affairs."[447] Second, it is disappointing because Arendt explored various forms of solipsism and rejected them. Yeatman brings this to the fore in her study of the individual in Arendt's thought: "[she] holds that the activity of thinking requires a human to withdraw from immersion in worldly practices and relationships–

[444] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 185.
[445] Here I disagree with Kateb's reading.
[446] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 114.
[447] Ibid., 111.

thereby creating a space within which to think undisturbed by worldly ties–but not only does she insist that such withdrawal is only relative and partial, she refuses to accept the proposition that it is in the process of inner retreat that a person finds his own true being, his individuality."[448] Mutual recognition could have illuminated the connections between individual morality to politics and the connection between inner plurality and worldly plurality.[449]

Arendt does allow that there are some situations in which the voice of conscience can have some public relevance, but restricts them to political emergencies.[450] Arendt terms these political emergencies "boundary situations" following Karl Jasper, and describes them as "times of crisis when, so to speak, we find ourselves with our back against the wall."[451] In those extreme situations when the mores of the day become distorted and one is asked to do something that one simply could not live with, would one have an excuse for not participating in politics. Then, and only then, conscience does become vital. Arendt says that "when everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action."[452] This action might then provide a safeguard against political evil, but as we have seen, only to a limited degree. And this is because, "those who say 'I can't' when the chips are down are 'neither heroes nor saints,' and if they become martyrs, which of course may happen, it happens against their will. In the world, moreover, where power counts, they are impotent."[453] Canovan explains:

> What gave her message urgency was the conviction that whereas good men would be martyred rather than participate in the horrors of totalitarianism, only good citizens could have prevented it in the first place.… She recognized that once totalitarianism was in place, it might well be that no place remained for citizenship, and that retreat into as much personal integrity as one could salvage was the best one could do.… She emphasized that it is only in extreme situations that this retreat

[448] Anna Yeatman, "Individuality and Politics: Thinking with and Beyond Hannah Arendt," in Action and Appearance, ed. Anna Yeatman, et al. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 70-1.
[449] In *The Promise of Politics* Arendt wrote: "Men not only exist in the plural as do all earthly beings, but have an indication of this plurality within themselves." Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 22. However she did not explicitly theorize how thinking oriented to plurality. For attempts to develop that relationship, see Yeatman and others.
[450] She writes that "the self as the ultimate criterion of moral conduct is politically a kind of emergency measure." "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 179.
[451] Ibid., 122.
[452] *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think*, vol. 1, 192. I.
[453] "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy."

> into personal integrity is unquestionably appropriate and was anxious that her overall message of the duty of citizenship should not be diluted by it.[454]

The upshot of separating morality from politics is that conscience is "thereby exiled from the genuine life of the city" as Francis Winters wrote.[455] He goes on to describe Arendt's political philosophy as having the effect of turning politics into a walled city and conscience into a refugee:

> Politics, in her definite reconstruction, is an enclosed city, man's habitat. Truth and conscience are recognized as neighbors, affecting the city indirectly, by maintaining their own secure borders where the city many not expand. The space for change in the human condition, the realm of freedom, is not unlimited but is bordered by the imperatives of truth and morality. But these neighbors, however honored, remain aliens to the city. Their only power, beyond definition, is negation: they may refuse to join the life of the city if invited, but they are allowed themselves no initiative.[456]

Christian love and politics

> Love, for reasons of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others…. Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical, but anti-political, perhaps the most powerful of all anti-political human forces.[457]

Arendt explores many facets of love in her dissertation on *Love and Saint Augustine* (*Der Liebsbegriff bei Augustin*), which I have touched upon earlier in their connection to her reading of Christian conscience,[458] but she also thought about love in *On Totalitarianism*,[459] and returned to it in *The Human Condition* as well.[460] There is not sufficient space here to treat the reasons why her reading of Christian love in Augustine went so badly wrong in the

---

[454] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 179.
[455] Winters, "The Banality of Virtue: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Reinterpretation of Political Ethics," 194.
[456] Ibid.
[457] Arendt, *The Human Condition: Second Edition*, 242.
[458] Her dissertation explores multiple conceptions of love–love as desire, love as charity and love as neighborly, in order to ask how for Augustine a Christian believer who loves God and has his mind set on the heavens is still able to love his neighbor in the here and now. Her rather startling conclusion is that the Augustinian structure of love as desire instrumentalizes love for neighbor rather than motivating love for the neighbor.
[459] In *On Totalitarianism* Arendt touches upon Augustine's affirmation of love: "*Volo ut sis* (I want you to be)." Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 394.
[460] She considers three conceptions of love in *The Human Condition*: the general human experience of love, Christian charity or love of neighbor, and respect or political love, which is a kind of friendship without intimacy or closeness. The third, which she called *amor mundi*, and considered using as the book's title, is conceived as a dispassionate commitment to the welfare of the world.

dissertation,[461] or to detail the ways in which her understanding of Augustine had changed by the time she wrote *On Totalitarianism*, or even to do more than touch upon her later efforts to theorize a counter-point to *amor dei*: *amor mundi*, a form of friendship which was to be the central virtue of active citizenship and what enables genuine political action.

What I want to point to here is one serious problem with her assessment of Christian love, encapsulated in her claim that love is unpolitical, a claim that is tied into her separation of ethics and politics. For Arendt's view was that *caritas*, like conscience, had no genuine place in the political arena. On her reading, *caritas* was something private, worldless and destructive of solidarity; therefore, it threatened to render political action impotent. As Eric Gregory pointed out, Arendt was unable to see Christian love as anything but misdirected or misplaced.[462] She viewed love "solely in terms of sentimental benevolence"; it was concerned "with the integrity of the self and with the neighbor's good–so it leads either to inwardness or intimacy."[463] So love too would be banished from public spaces. With this final backward glance at the lengths Arendt went to for the sake of defending political action from any subordination to ethical or religious concerns, we can now turn to Gillian Rose's identification of the re-emergence of the beautiful soul, with which this chapter began.

Hegel contra Arendt

At an Oxford Symposium on the beginning of the Polish administration of the site and museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Rose proposed that treatments of conscience which abstract an individual's moral judgment from the institutions that play a role in the formation or "socialization" of moral judgment, as Arendt does, undermine moral identity and moral agency. Exhibitions at Auschwitz which invite visitors to ask of themselves, "Could I have done this?" are thus misleading because they suggest that conscience is a single, weighty decision that changes everything. Separating conscience from the social and political institutions that shape it has the result of directing far too much attention to

[461] Several good analyses can be found in: Thomas Breidenthal, "Jesus Is My Neighbor: Arendt, Augustine, and the Politics of Incarnation," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 4 (2002). Rowan D. Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 191-206; Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*; Ronald Beiner, "Love and Worldliness: Hannah Arendt's Reading of Saint Augustine," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. L. May and J. Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997). Shin Chiba, "Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political: Love, Friendship, and Citizenship," *The Review of Politics,* 57 (1995).
[462] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*, 208.
[463] Ibid., 208, 17.

conscience as a form of moral decision-making and not giving enough consideration to the conversations that hinder and help us in envisioning the real moral possibilities in front of us. Arendt's thesis that "modernity made the Holocaust possible because its prevalent socialization–bureaucratic, technological, instrumentally-rational–robs us of moral autonomy and responsibility" is simply not helpful Rose contends, because it does not tell the full story.[464] What is more, it obscures the "far more difficult thought":

> That it is the very opposition between morality and legality–between inner, autonomous "conscience", and outer, heteronomous institutions–that depraves us. Simultaneous possession of inner freedom and outer unfreedom means that the border where cognitive activity and normative passivity become cognitive passivity and normative activity is changeable and obscure. There is a diremption in our agency and in our institutions, which any call to post-natural ethics (Levinas, Fackenheim or Bauman) will reinforce in its imaginary transcendence. To provoke a child or an adult who visits the "site" of Auschwitz not only to identify herself in infinite pain with "the victims", but to engage in intense self-questioning: "Could I have done this?" would be to reinforce the same conscience-stricken *Innerlichkeit* that counts for one half of this diremptions in our socialization. Exhibitions at Auschwitz, which are at present divided, lamentably and apparently unnegotiably, into "national" pavilions, might instead instantiate discussion "How easily could we have allowed this to be carried out?" Are we Germans "or" Polish Jews "or" Polish peasants? This might contribute to a chance in awareness and a questioning of our sentimentality as modern citizens, protected in all "innocence" by the military might of the modern state. For, in modern dirempted polities, it is the relation between different oppositions–innocence and might, authority and force–between the inner and outer boundaries of our self-identity and lack of self-identity that turns us into strangers to ourselves as moral agents and as social actors.[465]

Against these Auschwitz exhibitions and against Arendt's construal of conscience as a limit that might preserve moral sanity, Rose argued that conscience is less a question of whether you would stand up when a totalitarian leader comes to power and more a question about what you had been doing up until that point. To focus on the singular decision of autonomous conscience for or against heteronomous institutions, as Arendt does, is to fail to see the way the practices of institutional life inculcate virtues and vices that shape what decisions actually come before conscience and its moral vision. In opposing individual conscience and social institutions, Arendt also misses what Rose called in her talk at the symposium "the border where cognitive activity and normative passivity become cognitive

[464] Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 35.
[465] Ibid., 35-6.

passivity and normative activity."[466] This border or boundary is the site where one set of meanings or representations is most prone to turn into the opposite term against which it is defined. The problem is that such oppositions cannot be thought apart or together.

Rose's critique, which could be called "Hegel contra Arendt," is spelled out more fully in *The Broken Middle*. There Rose argues Arendt is getting lost in the oppositions she relies on when she separates conscience from social and political institutions, inner freedom from outer freedom, innocence from force, love from law, the individual from the modern state. Rose sees these separations as indicative of Arendt's failure to appreciate in her work on modern life that modernity is not a project; modernity is diremptive.[467] "Diremptive" is the way Roses characterizes neo-Kantian philosophy which has separated law from an uninvestigated transcendent which authorizes it. As Lloyd explains it, a diremption takes place when there is "an evasion of the investigation of the law itself."[468] By "law" Rose means:

> the falling towards or away from mutual recognition, the triune relationship, the middle, formed or deformed by reciprocal self-relations. The law, therefore, in its actuality means full mutual recognition, "spirit" or ethical life, but it can only be approached phenomenologically as it appears to us, modern legal persons, by expounding its dualistic reductions, when it is posited as modern legal status–the law of subjective rights separated from the law of the modern state.[469]

Law then, is mutual recognition, and, as Rowan Williams adds: "Law is what reason serves: the possibility, always present and always lost or to be lost, of a universal mutual 'inhabiting' of particular consciousnesses."[470] Rose's assessment of Arendt is that Arendt has separated the terms of ethical life "so that 'love'–discursive, friendly, saintly, agapic, aporetic, political–is opposed to 'the law'–the world, the city of man." What is more, Arendt focuses on love at the expense of law, in generating apolitical readings of Christian love and of conscience. There is simply not enough mutual recognition in Arendt's portrayal of Augustine's Christian community, which is social not political and thus lawless as if it were

[466] Ibid., 35.
[467] *The Broken Middle*, 240.
[468] Vincent Lloyd, "On the Use of Gillian Rose," *Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 5 (2007): 701.
[469] Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 75.
[470] Rowan D. Williams, "'The Sadness of the King': Gillian Rose, Hegel, and the Pathos of Reason," *Telos* 173, Winter (2015): 25.

a "sociality of the saints." Likewise, there is not enough mutual recognition in Arendt's portrayal of the conjoined operation of thinking, conscience and judgment.

Rose sees these separations as both valorizations and denigrations of ethical life, which are exposed in Kierkegaard, Hegel and Weber's treatments of the Reformation. She finds that their writings:

> all uncover the inversions of instituted meaning attendant on a culture which has separated religion and politics since the origin of Christianity; which has subordinated religion to politics since the Reformation; which has "emancipated" religion into civil society since the early nineteenth century, and has, effectively, delivered politics to "religion," dissipating both in subjectivity. Under such conditions, every meaning or representation is prone to turn into its contrary. Partial in origin yet holistic in ambition, every meaning is equally implicated in the meaning against which it is defined; infected with institutions it seeks to eschew: individual inwardness inverted into the ruthlessness of social institutions, or lack of inwardness colluding in new tyrannies.[471]

Separating religion and politics is deeply problematic because it leads to the inversion of institutions and inversions of intentions. That was the lesson Hegel tried to teach in recounting the story of the beautiful soul, which Rose offers back to Arendt. Rose sees Arendt representing this changing relation of religion and politics during a particular diremption of state and civil society in Germany, namely, the transition from Social Democracy to totalitarian rule.[472] At that juncture, Arendt's writing makes a distinction "between the aporetic individual at the mercy of incalculable agape and the public political world of equals."[473] This is how Arendt appears phenomenologically as the beautiful soul:

> While the beautiful soul withdraws herself from the world by repulsing it and retreating from it, the hard heart remains in the world but survives by retreating from and repulsing the other in judgment–judgment of hypocrisy–the self-conscious disparity between declaring universal duty yet living particular inner being, which is itself hypocritical in appealing to its own law and also failing to act–making duty a mere matter of words. This judgment, exalted into a culture, would eliminate barbarism–of evil, of hypocrisy, of "banality" of evil.[474]

[471] Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 164.
[472] Ibid., 155.
[473] Ibid., 216.
[474] Ibid., 237.

There is some irony in Arendt's presenting the beautiful soul, given her antipathy towards interiority, romantic isolation and any permanent withdrawal from public life, which she shunned early on in her study of Rahel Vahargen.[475] Nevertheless, Arendt's rejection of inwardness, her discounting the inner life's connection with outer existence and plurality,[476] and her representation of the beautiful soul is but another inversion that follows the separation of morality and politics, based on the distinction she makes between what is private and what is public. Arendt succumbs to the temptation to cultivate a beautiful soul most clearly when she separates love from the city and when she separates the individual judging conscience from the political labor of mutual recognition.[477] Judgment so conceived cannot acknowledge its identity with the action it so harshly judges. It hypocritically slides back into the nobility of the judging self, revealing the kind of ethical posture we see in the diremption of the acting and judging conscience Hegel depicted. This diremption calls forth the hard-hearted hypocrite:

> Love "and" the state cannot be thought apart or together.... While the beautiful soul withdraws herself from the world by repulsing it and retreating from it, the hard heart remains in the world but survives by retreating from and repulsing the other in judgment–judgment of hypocrisy–the self-conscious disparity between declaring universal duty yet living particular inner being, which is itself hypocritical in appealing to its own law and also failing to act–making duty a mere matter of words. This judgment, exalted into a culture, would eliminate barbarism–of evil, of hypocrisy, of "banality" of evil. It affirms the "infinity of opinions" so that "going astray with Plato" is taken to mean opting for the charm of Plato's person in preference to whatever truth is chanced upon by his opponents. This interpretation reduces the difficulty of truth to opinion, universal and person–This judging and talking is, therefore, what is true and invincible, while it overpowers everything; it is solely with this alone that one has truly to do with in this actual world. If absolute freedom removes the antithesis between universal and individual will so that the world may be destroyed, absolute judgment–judgment made omnipotent–would result in universal hypocrisy: for there is no truth, no universal, to be acknowledged, but only the dissolving play of opinions from which knowledge and truth and the risk of staking oneself for the sake of something transcendent and uncertain are banished. Absolute judgment would become absolute perversion as dynamic but suppressed knowledge must masquerade as opinion, and so appears as universal deception of itself and others. Can this be the sociality of the saints?[478]

[475] Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*.
[476] Yeatman, "Individuality and Politics: Thinking with and Beyond Hannah Arendt."
[477] Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 237-38. Rose points out that some of Arendt's early writing (for instance *On Totalitarianism)* did a better job of exploring love and law simultaneously, without setting them in opposition to each other and dirempting them.
[478] Ibid., 237.

This is a temptation Arendt succumbs to whenever she demotes *caritas* and elevates absolute judgment, rather than thinking through the contradictions between the individual will and the universal, or the contradictions between fascism and representation, as Rose put it in another essay.[479] Had Arendt in representing the beautiful soul's judging conscience exposed rather than disowned our mutual implication in cultural and political practices that threaten to undo us, then the Hard Heart of the Judging Conscience could have broken open in mutual recognition, as Hegel showed. Breaking the dialectic would have required a strong moral motivation, the *amor dei* that animated Augustine and the communion of saints, a stronger one than Arendt was prepared to entertain.

Rose's identification of the beautiful soul is so interesting because it indicates why this happens again and again in this secular age. It dramatizes the real struggles involved in setting aside ordinary goods to act for the good of all (even in posing the question, "What ought I to do?") and it shows why fascism, the assertion of enraged particularity, continues to re-emerge in the mundane and ordinary.[480] At the end of the day, what Rose contributes to all projects of re-working conscience is this analysis: "Politics does not happen when you act on behalf of your own damaged good, but when you act, without guarantees, for the good of all–this is to take the risk of the universal interest."[481]

Conclusion

When Eichmann testified in his own defense that he had always followed his conscience, the traditional understanding of conscience become untenable for Hannah Arendt. This chapter examined her attempt to overcome the problem of conscience by building upon a Socratic ethic and reconceptualizing conscience as an inner principle, connected to thinking and judging. Nevertheless, re-working conscience in this fashion left her tangled up in almost as many conceptual knots as the traditional understanding had. Arendt's efforts to re-conceptualize conscience are premised on a distinction she made between what is private and what is public, between what is moral and what is political. Conscience, goodness, and love were relegated to the private realm, whereas respect, friendship and judgment were fitted to the political realm.

---

[479] Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation, 41-62.
[480] Ibid., 54. That should read "the representation of Fascism and the fascism of representation," to be true to Rose's meaning.
[481] Ibid., 62.

In maintaining those separations, Arendt robbed conscience of a shared world where it could have been shaped by goods held in common, and where mutual recognition might have been possible. In creating those separations, she also reduced conscience to a judgment, an offshoot of the thinking process, without a shared world where the moral terrain is apprehended through certain dispositions and habits. The problem of conscience is that it is both formal and normative; however, Arendt's efforts maintained only the formal procedure of conscience as encapsulated in the question "what must I do to be able to live with myself?" If this formal procedure of conscience is to be normative then it also needs social existence and public practices with which it can communicate and instantiate its claim to be about the good. When conscience is placed in the private sphere separated from those historical, social and cultural practices, it falls apart and the consciousness of the beautiful soul re-emerges. Gillian Rose shows us how easily this happens in secular modernity and what exactly it at stake when it does.

VI
Distinctive features of conscience

Introduction

This thesis has argued that the problem of conscience is that its formalism always has the potential to undermine its purported morality. The beautiful soul stands as a salutary warning that if we want to ensure the formal procedure of conscience is in fact normative, conscience needs to be considered in light of the social existence and public practices that it can use to communicate and instantiate its claim to be about the good. The morality of conscience is undermined whenever conscience is placed in the private sphere separated from those historical, social and cultural practices. It is also undermined when conscience is treated as a single-weighty decision instead of being assessed in terms the virtues, habits and dispositions that have shaped what decisions come before conscience. In both circumstances, conscience falls apart and the consciousness of the beautiful soul re-emerges. Gillian Rose shows us how easily this occurs in secular modernity.

Taylor's analysis of life in the immanent frame allowed us to see why we continue to fall back on the discourse of conscience, despite risking the fate of the beautiful soul. Life in the immanent frame is characterized by malaise (contestability, cross-pressures, fragilization, optionality), which indicate that modern culture is for all its secularity restless at the barriers of the human sphere and that we need a political ethic with a firmer basis than altruism can provide. Taylor argues that we are all–traditional religious, spiritual, atheist alike–liberals, in that we all elect to spin the immanent frame in a particular way, whether we view it as open to the transcendent or as closed. As both open and closed views of the modern moral order's immanent frame require a leap of faith, Taylor issued an invitation to try to inhabit an open stance. A number of scholars have taken up that challenge and work is underway to develop a political ethic with a firmer basis than altruism provides. There is much interest in exploring how agape can frame the conditions of living in pluralistic liberal democracies.[482]

[482] Recent to contributions to this conversation in political theology include: Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2019); Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*; Timothy P. Jackson, *Political Agape: Christian Love and Liberal Democracy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans,

If we take an open stance to sources that transcend the self, then conscience begins to acquire certain distinctive features. This chapter focuses on what those features are, and it does so in service to those who are restless at the barriers of the human sphere. First, it considers conscience as a learned discourse about moral decision-making, which is a form of human agency and is capable of formation and deformation. It then looks at conscience as dependent upon self-knowledge and realism about the world. Finally, it delineates what authority conscience can be said to have and clarifies how decisions of conscience differ from other moral decisions. By drawing upon the theological perspective of Rowan Williams and others, these features of conscience are thrown into sharp relief.

The aim of this chapter is to see what sort of starting place these theological features offer for re-conceptualizing conscience. A new starting place is needed because in much of the popular literature, conscience is still taken as self-explanatory or as having common sense meaning, even by scholars who acknowledge conscience to be beset with problems (linguistic and otherwise); therefore, conscience has not been thoroughly interrogated as a theological concept. Drawing out the distinctive features of conscience in this chapter is therefore a necessary and important prolegomenon to re-conceptualizing conscience in theological terms.

Conscience is a discourse about decision-making

At one time or another, we have all been told to "search your conscience" or "consult your conscience" or "follow your conscience." Expressions such as these can be misleading in that they contain the suggestion that conscience is some sort of repository of right answers to questions about what I ought to do or that it is a catalogue of rules for behavior that can be consulted when I am unsure about how to judge or carry out an action. Conscience is neither a repository of ready-made solutions to any moral dilemma that might arise nor a catalogue of moral responsibilities. In fact, what conscience denotes is not a thing at all but rather a mode, specifically a mode of judgment. By depicting conscience as a mode of judgment, I am trying to present it not as a human faculty but as a useful fiction that can

2015); O. O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community: The 2001 Stob Lectures* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).

help to describe how we go about reaching moral decisions.[483] I have tried to make this point in the first chapter by indicating that conscience is formal. To put it another way, conscience is a learned discourse.

Although conscience is a discourse about certain kinds of moral decisions, it is often perceived as a feeling or intuition that defies reason, this perception is strengthened where moral inarticulacy is prevalent. In response, scholars have worked to identify the various roles moral reasoning plays in decisions of conscience, from the time in which a person becomes aware of a dilemma up until its resolution, with the aim of showing that the work of reason is not limited to the final judgment.[484] Reason may contribute to every phase of the decision making process: in defining the nature of the problem, in gathering the relevant information, in determining which factors are irrelevant, in proposing possible solutions, in assessing their worth in the situation at hand and in relation to the larger context, in seeking the advice of other thoughtful people, evaluating our own reasoning in light of the Scripture and tradition, in offering reasons for our decision when questioned about it. In practice that means being willing to discuss the goods that motivate us and the reasons that might justify us, especially with those who disagree, for the sake of deepening our own understanding and of sharing what we have come to believe to be truth with others in humility.

There is a further observation that I wish to make about conscience as a mode of decision-making specifically pertaining to the role of moral reasoning in decisions of conscience. This is that moral reasoning is embodied, learned and tradition bound. Moral reasoning has not always been viewed in this way but there is consensus among many ethicists that reason is inextricably bound up in our personal histories, social contexts, cultural narratives and systems of signification. Our reasoning is inevitably shaped and tutored by our emotions,[485] intuitions and imaginations, by social conventions, by cultural sensibilities, by the presence or absence of religious convictions, by fears and desires that are both conscious and

[483] Here I concur with David McCarthy. David Matzko McCarthy, "Veritatis Splendor: Conscience and Following Christ," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 8, no. 2 (1995).
[484] Callahan, *In Good Conscience: Reason and Emotion in Moral Decision Making*, 115-42. Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, 135-40; Curran, *Conscience*, 3-24.
[485] Among the numerous studies of the role of emotion in guiding reason, William Wainwright's stands out. He argues that reason functions properly only when informed by a rightly disposed heart, that is, when it is influenced by the appropriate emotions, feelings, and intuitions. William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prologomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

unconscious.[486] Decisions of conscience are not abstracted, disembodied, dispassionate judgments of reason, but deliberations that engage the whole of me–my dispositions, feelings, desires, character, intuitions–and not just my intellect, as Linda Hogan argues.[487] It follows that moral reasoning is mediated through language, culture, history and context.

In the Christian tradition, moral decision-making is not simply viewed in an ethical framework of reflection on what I ought to do. It is also viewed in a theological framework of reflection on what God would wish for me to do or what God is inviting me to do. Within that framework, conscientious decisions are identified not only with reason and but also with the operation of the Holy Spirit, who is said to inspire, instruct and guide these decisions in the process of helping one to discern God's will in the matter. The divine will that is discerned in the process of reaching a decision of conscience is variously described as "God's voice" or "God's truth" or "God's abode within us." These metaphors underwrite the Christian conviction that there is moral and that humans have the task of discerning it and living in accordance with it in order to faithfully resolve moral problems as they arise. Discerning what I ought to do, by God's grace, is then not just a matter of knowing aright the contours of the moral order but also a matter of connecting to its source and thereby perceiving new ways of being.

By identifying conscience as a discourse about moral decision-making I mean to delineate the role of decision-making in talk of conscience and to demarcate the place of conscience-talk in ethics. We saw in chapter one that conscience is formal; therefore, it can assume any meaning, and as a master sign it tends to aggregate meanings to itself unless firmly framed within a linguistic, conceptual and social context. We also saw in chapter five that when the formal procedure of conscience is treated apart from social existence and the public practices through which it could have communicated and instantiated its claim to be about the good, it falls apart and the consciousness of the beautiful soul re-emerges. To avoid

---

[486] Gregory Jones sums up much of the recent thinking about moral reasoning in his account of the moral life, while arguing that theological claims make a difference for how the activity of moral judgment is construed, and that those theological claims need to be explicitly Trinitarian if they are to adequately describe how moral life is transformed through discipleship. L. Gregory Jones, *Transformed Judgment* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990).

[487] Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, 7, 136. This means debates about whether conscience is best understood in intellectual terms or intuitional or emotional terms miss the point. For a summary of the chicken and egg debate about whether moral reasons or moral emotions come first, see Keane's recent book. He examines whether emotions provide the motives and commitments that mere principles might be unable to generate or whether principles provide the emotions with objects that one can endorse by explaining why it makes ethical sense to have those emotions: Webb Keane, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 58-59.

treating conscience as a master-sign and to avoid the fate of the beautiful soul, we must recognize that conscience is not ethical unless it is contextualized by social and institutional existence. Moreover, we must recognize that ethics is not reducible to isolated decisions, given the role that social and institutional life plays in shaping decision-making. In other words, there is more to conscience than the claim to have arrived at an ethical decision and there is more to ethics than talk of conscience, even though claims of conscience have special status.

Conscience is a form of human agency

Hearing the so-called "voice of conscience" is sometimes experienced as uncanny, mysterious, and other-worldly. It is likened to the discovery of the presence of another will inside our own.[488] Oftentimes talk of conscience evokes a supposed agency in us that is prompting us to perform good acts, judging us on our past performance, and sanctioning what we ought to do and be in the future. For that reason, conscience might be spoken of as a tutor, a guide, a companion, or a pedagogue. One of conscience's distinctive features it that it is experienced as another form of moral agency working alongside us, speaking through us of our deepest convictions and impelling us to act on them. While conscience can appear as if it were a separate moral agent, from a theological perspective there is no other agency but that of us and of God. Conscience is however a discourse about our decision-making through which we may become aware of God's will to the extent that our decisions of conscience are made in light of the judgments that God has made in Christ and in the process of our endeavoring to recognize, discern, reason about, and conform to those judgments.

The kind of human agency presupposed by decisions of conscience should not be conceived of as independent of God's agency, in competition with it or to be conflated with it.[489] It is

[488] I am referring to the tendency to treat conscience as an oracular source of moral truth, experienced as a sort of voice that comes to me and influencing my moral judgment one way or the other by its deliveries. As William Perkins said, "conscience is a little God sitting in the middle of men's hearts.. Cited in Ojakangas, *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience*, 7. While the "voice of conscience" might suggest the voice of a little God (or indeed that of a big God a small space), it is none of these things. As Robert Speamann quips, "conscience does not *influence* moral judgment at all; it *is* moral judgment." Italics his. Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, 168.

[489] This is not to deny the *phenomenological* experience of an agency within. Only to insist that when conscience is spoken of as the voice of God within me, the double personal agency–God's and mine–does not imagine divine and human agencies in competition such that one is displacing the other or that they are rivals in any way. God is not one agent among others. God may act through my actions, but God's action and my action are not comparable and take place on different planes altogether. For more on this Christological mistake

important to underline that point when hearing the voice of conscience is sometimes likened to experiencing God immanent within us or to an unmediated experience of the Holy Spirit.[490] That language is unfortunate, because conscience is human. It is a human capacity for a human judgment, even if it is my hope that through prayer I may be guided and inspired by God in making such judgments.[491] Nevertheless, when I hear the voice of conscience telling me the way that I should walk in, it is my voice I hear. As James Hanigan has observed, "judgments of conscience may well be couched in language such as 'God told me to do X,' or 'God has called me to do X,' or 'the Church has taught me I should do X,' or 'it is the Christian thing to do,' or 'it is only common sense,' or 'my parents would want me to do X and would be hurt if I did not,' or 'the teacher, the pastor, the boss told me to do X,' or 'society urges us to do X,' or 'everybody thinks X is the thing to do,' or 'our survival requires that we do X.'" And yet, the judgment of conscience is my own judgment on my conduct for which I must take personal responsibility, even when I evoke other authorities or offer other rationales or describe my decision in terms that seem to shift the blame or evade responsibility.[492]

Conscience can be formed and can fail

In the Christian tradition, confidence in a decision of conscience is not grounded in any supposed infallibility about its judgments.[493] Following our conscience is no guarantee that we will have done what is right in every instance. Decisions of conscience are necessarily partial and one-sided because of our circumstances are necessarily shaped and limited by our language we speak, by the traditions out of which we come, the communities which nurture us, and by our experiences. Such decisions are no more (or less) reliable than any other judgments we make and are equally prone to self-deception, self-delusion, mixed-

concerning godhead and manhood in Christ's one person and the repercussions for human action, see Tanner's exposition. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), 2-5; 90-91.

[490] It is all too easy to identify conscience with the Holy Spirit, as the Catholic ethicist James Hanigan cautions, while calling for a more nuanced relationship between conscience and the Holy Spirit. James P. Hanigan, "Conscience and the Holy Spirit," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 51 (1996): 227-46.

[491] Billy and Keating, *Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology*.

[492] Hanigan, "Conscience and the Holy Spirit," 237.

[493] As discussed in Chapter 1, our natural dispositional grasp of the first principles of practical reasoning, termed *synderesis*, which has been closely associated with conscience in the Thomistic tradition, was understood to be infallible. Nevertheless, the application of that innate sense of the good to particular moral decisions, termed *conscientia*, was not considered infallible. Kant is thought to have ascribed infallibility to conscience; Kazim's monograph clarifies in what sense this is true of Kant: Emre Kazim, *Kant on Conscience: A Unified Approach to Moral Self-Consciousness* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 58-108.

motives, prejudice, error, illusion, failure and sin.[494] Confidence in the decisions of conscience stems from an understanding of who I am that enables me to know what action will be an appropriate response to the truth about myself and the world around me.

There are plenty of good reasons for modesty in one's affirmations about the truth, perceived by conscience, and humility about one's grasp of it. Our insights into our own motivations and into what is of importance and of value are often limited by the shape of our experience and distorted by our imperfections of character. As a result, our judgments and evaluations are frequently partial, clouded and uncertain. There is then a responsibility to form conscience.[495] Theologically speaking, making decisions of conscience accurately is not simply a matter of increasing what we know, that is, having more information on which to base the judgments we make. It is a matter of increasing our capacity to do good, that is, by growing in virtue and by growing in holiness. The ability to make decisions of conscience accurately can be strengthened by certain practices, namely through our interactions with others, especially those with whom we can argue and dialogue.[496] They are also strengthened in fellowship with a community of faith whose common life includes hearing scripture, receiving the sacraments, praising God and partaking in the means of grace.[497] Similarly, the ability to formulate and act on decisions of conscience can also be misguided and distorted by certain practices, take for instance, those activities that tend to distract us and effectively diminish our freedom to do what we have determined to do.[498]

The role of self-knowledge

> Whom shall I marry? Shall I marry at all? Which charity shall I support this Christmas? Shall I resign from this political party, which is now committed to things I do not believe in—but is still better than the other parties in some ways? Should I

[494] For an influential analysis of self-deception and its role in moral decision making, see Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
[495] There are some notable theological accounts of conscience that strongly reject the idea that conscience can be formed. These accounts do not conceive of conscience as a judgment that can be strengthened and formed because they do not conceive of conscience as a judgment in the first place. Instead conscience is reduced to routine feelings of guilt and shame. While feelings of guilt and shame may be part and parcel of the actual experience of conscience, especially the phenomenology of having a guilty conscience, here I want to avoid reducing the concept of conscience to its noncognitive dimensions.
[496] For an Augustinian account of the role of dialogue, see Charles T. Mathewes, "Pluralism, Otherness, and the Augustinian Tradition," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 1 (1998).
[497] Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, "Conscience: Knowledge of Moral Truth," in *Conscience*, ed. C.E. Curran (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2004).
[498] Rowan Williams has drawn attention to freedom from distraction as one of the marks of mature Christian decision-making. Rowan D. Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 297.

> become a vegetarian? Should I break the law and join an anti-government protest? Should I refuse to pay my taxes when I know they are partly used to buy weapons of mass destruction?[499]

Decisions of conscience are conditioned by the agent's beliefs about him or herself. As Rowan Williams reminds us, decisions such as these are shaped by the sort of person I am, by what issues concern me, by how I imagine what is "right" for me or truthful to what I know about myself and who I am becoming.[500] When I ask, "What ought I to do?" in quandaries, such as the ones Williams' describes, the answer has to do with who I understand myself to be, what I understand the meaning and truth of my life to be, and what that then to requires of me at this particular juncture. Impersonal solutions cannot help me decide what it is that I must do to respond appropriately to these kinds of dilemmas, because the right course of action is not something that can be determined in some sort of vacuum, irrespective of the unique set of relations, responsibilities, and roles in which I find myself. Thus, it can help to think of conscience as "reasoning from the first-person perspective."[501]

Knowing what I must do therefore requires a certain degree of self-discovery and self-awareness. For that reason, conscience has long been associated with moral self-examination, the process of going over the events of a previous period in order to call to mind what you did or failed to do.[502] This moral examination is a personal undertaking,

---

[499] Questions that Archbishop Rowan Williams put to participants of the Lambeth Conference in the plenary session held on July 22, 1998. His address was republished here: Ibid., 300.
[500] Ibid., 295-96.
[501] The phrase "reasoning from a first person perspective" is Moyar's. Moyar, *Hegel's Conscience*, 14.
[502] Examining one's conscience in order to bring to mind one's sins of thought, word, deed, desire and omission is a feature of penitential modes of confession. Over the years, manuals were compiled to aid confessors in determining the specific nature of the sin being confessed and what would therefore be a fitting penalty given that person's particular struggle. The tradition of examining one's conscience has therefore grown up alongside a long tradition of problem solving, designed to aid a doubtful conscience. That tradition of problem solving, known as casuistry, attempts to solve the issue of what to do in a new situation by an appeal to the congruencies with other cases. In casuistry, one turns not to moral principles for guidance in novel circumstances but rather to specific cases that might provide analogies, serve as paradigms, or suggest general maxims. For a historical treatment of casuistry in the medieval and early modern periods, see: Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Their work forms part of a reassessment of casuistry's ability to generate resources for making practical judgments about real life issues and to settle cases of conscience. A sampling of recent theological attempts to repristinate casuistry includes: Stanley Hauerwas, "Casuistry as a Narrative Art," *Interpretation* 37, no. 4 (1983); James F. Keenan, "The Return of Casuistry," *Theological Studies* 57, no. 1 (1996); Richard B. Miller, *Casuistry and Modern Ethics: A Poetics of Practical Reasoning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Christopher Steck, "Saintly Voyeurism: A Methodological Necessity for the Christian Ethicist?" in *New Wine, New Wineskins: A Next Generation Reflects on Key Issues in Catholic Moral Theology*, ed. William C. Mattison (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2005).

perhaps best understood as a self-critical endeavor that calls into question "the project of being me," as Williams puts it. At times that endeavor has involved examining myself against norms such as the Ten Commandments or precepts of the church, which describe the minimum moral requirements of the faithful in the Roman Catholic tradition. And at other times, it has involved examining myself against the Christian identity I am trying to realize, that is, who I am in unity with Christ and who am becoming more like through the power of the Holy Spirit.[503] However it is construed, the task of self-examination is to orient myself in moral space by figuring out how I stand in relation to the issues facing my community, how I stand in relation to where I want to be, and how I stand in relation to my calling or vocation.

In the Christian spiritual tradition, moral self-examination is meant to provide knowledge about who I am. The self that I discover through self-examination is not a hidden core of authentic agency uncorrupted by any engagement in society, uncompromised by language or history. That notion of a "true self" or "inner self" has more to do with romantic mythology.[504] Theologically speaking, the self-knowledge sought in self-examination is not about finding an 'inner self' but about finding God. As Rowan Williams puts it, "The self that I am, the self that I have been made to be, is the self engaged by God in love and now in process of re-creation through the community of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. It is no use trying to answer the question about who I really am independently of this. There is no secret, detached, individual ego apart from these realities in which I am gracefully entangled."[505] Williams' assertion that there is no self apart from the realities in which I am entangled is meant to counter and correct the assumption that the inward turn of moral self-examination necessarily amounts to lonely introspection, a self-absorptive disregard for

---

[503] This involves my making decisions with an eschatological framework, that is, in the context of the call of my perfected self, that is, who I am in Christ. Karl Barth's brief discussion of conscience portrayed conscience as a call or summons and strongly reasserted the eschatological dimension to decisions of conscience. Karl Barth and Dietrich Braun, *Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 475-97. Extrapolating from Barth, John Webster defines conscience as "the presence to me in reflection of the moral effect of my new identity established in Christ through the Holy Spirit." John Webster, "God and Conscience," in *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), 161.

[504] Charles Taylor has painstakingly mapped the development of the modern inward turn and its implications for our quest for the good. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. The inward turn and the search for the inner self are themes that have also been taken up albeit in a less sustained way by Peter Gay as part of his analysis of cultural trends. See Peter Gay, *The Naked Heart: Bourgeois Experience Victoria to Freud* (London: Harper Collins, 1996). For a recent analysis of modern reflexivity, of both Kantian and German romantic views of human nature, and of the development of anthropology, see Chad Wellmon, *Becoming Human: Romantic Anthropology and the Embodiment of Freedom* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

[505] Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," 300.

the social world or narcissism. We do not need to cultivate beautiful souls to learn who we are and what we must do.

Alisdair MacIntyre makes this point well when he describes how knowledge of oneself and of one's moral judgments is acquired. He insists that self-knowledge comes from the observations of others or from having made oneself into an observer, and explain that "what is there to be observed, whether by others or by that apart of oneself which has become an observing other, is characteristically and generally not an individual self in isolation, but an individual involved in some specific and particularized network of social relationships, whose modes of participation in those relationships express his or her moral commitments."[506] Therefore, the kind of self-knowledge that sheds light on one's moral commitments comes from participating in networks of social relationships, not from solitary introspection.

The role of beliefs about the world

Gaining knowledge of myself, my moral options and my moral goals is not then something that happens in a vacuum. When I ask, "What ought I to do?," I am trying to reach a decision about how to respond at a particular juncture, in relation to particular people, in the context of particular circumstances, and in light of the moral options set before me. For that reason, deciding such matters is never simply about invoking a common-sense category or a general norm that will put an act in its context. Instead such decisions are marked by reflexivity. I have tried to show in the brief treatment of reflexive self-awareness above that when I ask, "What ought I to do?," I am making a judgment about myself, requiring a certain self-knowledge. Yet that is not merely a judgment about the demands of my own integrity and identity. It is also a judgment about a meaning and value of action I believe I am obligated to take now. For both my beliefs about how things are with myself and my beliefs about how things are with the world at large help to bring my moral options into focus.

In his study of conscience, C.S. Lewis draws on the trope of conscience as an inner lawgiver, a source of moral legislation written on the tablet of the heart, to underscore the importance

[506] MacIntyre, "Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Social Practice: What Holds Them Apart?," 108.

of my beliefs about the world around me. Lewis writes:

> No lawgiver, inner or outer, gives laws in a vacuum; he always has real or supposed facts in mind, an idea of what is, which influences his rulings about what ought to be. Thus, the outer lawgiver ceases to make new statues against witchcraft when he ceases to believe in it and does not make vaccination compulsory till he thinks it will prevent smallpox. It is the same with the inner lawgiver. If you believe in the Christian God, *synteresis* [conscience] will lay upon you many duties towards him, and if you disbelieve, it will not. If you believe in transubstantiation it will tell you to risk Tyburn by attending Mass, and if you believe the Mass to be idolatry it will tell you to risk Smithfield by abstaining from it.[507]

When Lewis says that the dictates of conscience are conditioned by a person's beliefs about God, the world and his duties, he is underlining the point that conscience is formal.[508] As conscience is formal, a person might describe his decision to attend mass as obeying his conscience, if he held certain beliefs, but he might equally describe his decision to abstain from mass as obeying his conscience, if he held other beliefs, because conscience has no content to call its own. The importance of Lewis' point about the formalism of conscience is that what I think my conscience dictates I should do very much depends upon what I believe to be true about the world around me. My idea of "what is" has a bearing on "what ought to be" and therefore on "what I must do then."

While the dictates of conscience are conditioned by my beliefs about myself and about the world around me, they should not be reduced to what is specified by my state of mind or constructed by consciousness or generated simply out of what I will or desire to be the case. The role that self-awareness plays is not that of sovereign self-governance. Some moral realism is needed here in discussions of "what is" as Rowan Williams has gone to great lengths to show when he writes of the importance of a "realism which shows us ourselves as neither wholly finished or wholly free, as having a body and a presence to nature and to society."[509] That the agent making a decision of conscience is "neither wholly finished or wholly free" is not often or adequately acknowledged in discussions of conscience, which continue to posit an autonomous agent freely constructing his world.

---

[507] Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 201.

[508] This is a point that Hegel was also keen to make when he drew a distinction between formal conscience, which is our certainty about our moral duty, and true or actual conscience, which is our disposition to the good. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 164. §137.

[509] Rowan D. Williams, "'Religious Realism': On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt," in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 248.

The authority of conscience

Decisions of conscience are experienced as uncompromising.[510] There is simply no arguing with conscience once the judgment has been made; it is an irrevocable decision. And once a decision of conscience is made there is a moral imperative to follow through with the decision by acting upon it even if that means putting oneself on the line. Why do claims of conscience exert an imperative force that obligates the agent to act in accordance with them? From whence does the authority of conscience derive?

The perceived authority of conscience has been bolstered in two main ways over the years. Firstly, claims of conscience have been treated as authoritative by virtue of being divinely inspired. Here conscience is interpreted as the voice of God, drawing on the uncanny way the voice of conscience is sometimes experienced as the presence of another will inside our own impelling us to act. I have tried to counter the assumption by arguing that conscience is not a form of divine agency within us but rather a discourse about moral decision-making, albeit one in which we may become aware of God's will. Secondly, claims of conscience have been treated as authoritative by virtue of their perceived infallibility. Here conscience is interpreted as an immanent source of truth with which we are in touch. As such any judgment that draws on it is always bound to be right. I have tried to counter this assumption by arguing that conscience is formal and not a storehouse or repository of truths from which to draw on in reaching a decision. Moreover, the verdicts of conscience are the end result of deliberation. They are no more or less reliable than any other moral judgments

[510] Decisions of conscience are not just binding on the agent. There is a sense in which such decisions attempt to impose themselves on others and to oblige them as well. That is because decisions of conscience are not mere statements about personal inclination, though there is a tendency to conflate claims of conscience (for example, the claim that "I believe that fighting in this war is wrong.") with assertions of a personal preference or will ("I prefer to avoid military service."). Robert Vischer has worked to disambiguate these kinds of claims by pointing out that claims of conscience not only assert something about the speaker's feeling but also assert something about what the speaker perceives to be the truth. In that claims of conscience involve a truth claim, they presume a normative background. The truth claim indicates that it is not merely a question of what a person happens to think is good or right for himself, but what he thinks is in fact good and right irrespective of his own preferences. In that decisions or conscience make truth claims and convey the normative implications of those claims, they petition others to recognize that same truth and defer to it. Vischer, *Conscience and the Common Good: Reclaiming the Space between Person and State*, 73-97. Karen S. Feldman has undertaken an investigation of how the metaphors and figures used to describe how a verdict of conscience is taken as binding upon oneself also work, at a textual level, as petitions and persuasions that attempt to exert a binding force upon the reader. The rhetoric that she foregrounds include depictions of conscience by way of "figures of activities, such as seeing, hearing, telling, judging, biting, strangling, gnawing, punishing, and torturing; spatial and architectural figures, as of the heart, a courtroom, an inner hell, and a church building; and heterogeneous images of conscience as spark, worm, natural light, inscription, and feeling." Feldman, *Binding Words: Conscience and Rhetoric in Hobbes, Hegel, and Heidegger*.

we may make for they are equally prone to self-deception, mixed-motives, prejudice, error, failure and sin.

Those who wish to relativize the authority of conscience tend to locate the source of conscience in either the individual preference or, alternatively, in social conditioning. In the first instance, the voice of conscience is my subjective inclination getting voiced. Thus, my claim of conscience amounts to whatever I feel to be the case and heeding conscience is indicative of following my personal inclinations. Conscience therefore becomes a matter of personal preference. This is the path of the beautiful soul. In the second instance, the voice of conscience is merely a public opinion or an internalized parental authority getting voiced. Thus, my claim of conscience amounts to whatever might give me comfort by incurring a good conscience or warding off a bad conscience, where heeding the authority of conscience is indicative of my longing for social approbation or a dread of social censure.[511] Conscience therefore becomes a matter of social conditioning. This is the path Freud took.[512]

A theological approach to conscience does need not to attribute the claims of conscience to a source in God or in the apprehension of truth immanent within us. Nor does it need to reduce claims of conscience to subjective inclinations or repressive social forces. Those factors certainly color decisions of conscience, but they do not tell the whole story. Instead the "voice of conscience" can be seen as something we have constructed for ourselves from

[511] On this view, conscience originates in the relation of child to parent and that it can be linked to the function of the Freudian superego. The superego embodies the values that have been internalized in childhood by parental authority figures and societal conventions and shaped our sense of right and wrong in the pre-moral phase of personal development. As part of the functioning of the superego, the promptings of conscience command us to act in accordance with the norms that were internalized in childhood not only for the sake of gaining acceptance and approval, but also under the threat of being penalized by feelings of guilt and self-reproach were we to challenge the moral standards we have internalized. While the Freudian superego seems to approximate the inwardness, imperativity, and authority of conscience, it is a non-rational self-accusing, repressive force in the life of a person that makes unconscious demands on him or her by way of internalized authoritative persons, thereby blocking his or her moral independence and maturity. It is therefore hard to see how conscience as superego could have a positive function in propelling us to act ethically when it is in fact an anti-ethical agency, bombarding us with impossible demands and punishing us for our failure to meet those demands by provoking excessive feelings of guilt and anxiety. That has not stopped some from trying to make a case for the Freudian super-ego having a positive influence on moral agency. See D.C. Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Guyton B. Hammond, *Conscience and Its Recovery: From the Frankfurt School to Feminism*, Studies in Religion and Culture (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

[512] The crucial differences between the conscience and the superego have been enumerated in recent years. Richard Gula has reconstructed the differences between conscience and superego first charted by John Glaser. Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 123-30. John W Glaser, "Conscience and Super-Ego: A Key Distinction," *Theological Studies* 32: 30-47.

a variety of sources, taking into account our personal experience and self-knowledge, our apprehension of the truth of the world around us, religious teaching, social teaching, our feelings and intuitions.

If conscience is formal does its moral authority come from? To put it another way, why grant claims of conscience an objective entitlement that demands the recognition of others? Contemporary discussions on the authority of conscience tend to bracket the issue of the conscience's source, whether working out of a secular or theological tradition. That is because in contemporary discussions, claims of conscience are granted authority, respect and protection, not on the basis of the source of those claims but on the basis of the role those claims are believed to play shoring up moral integrity and autonomy.

On this understanding, what my conscience tells me to do is known through an internal hunt for feelings of certainty by which I infer that a certain course of action is right. Making a decision of conscience is identified with that inner sense of certainty and amounts to a wholehearted identification with the bedrock convictions that are experienced as constitutive of my identity. So, it goes to reason that acting out of a sense of certainty and in accord with strongly held convictions contributes to my moral autonomy, in that it allows me to develop and claim a moral worldview as my own. When I act freely according to what I hold with certitude to be the morally right thing to do in my circumstances, my action expresses autonomy in that it stems from my own commitments. It also goes to reason that acting out of a sense of certainty and in accord with what I judge to be my obligations and values contributes to my moral integrity, for when I act freely out of a strong sense of who I am and what I believe, my actions are consonant with my moral convictions and core commitments. Such convictions and commitments give meaning and direction to my life and having them respected is a condition for my self-respect. So, denying a person the freedom to act according to his conscience effectively undermines that person's moral autonomy and personal integrity, thereby threatening that person's very sense of moral identity.[513]

[513] A number of studies have undertaken to show how the concept of conscience has provided the ontological basis for individualism and the origins of individual rights. These genealogies of modern morals examine conscience as an integral part of moral subjectivism, that is, the exercise of personal willing and agency, while tracing the role conscience has played in the liberal tradition of political theory. For a recent potted history of conscience's career in the development of liberal society, see Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual* (London: Penguin Books, 2006). For a different narration of the relation that has unfolded between concepts of

When a person is not free to act on a decision of conscience, there is a sense of self-betrayal that generates regret, guilt and a feeling of no longer living at peace with oneself. In reflecting on the testimonies of conscientious objectors, the ethicist James Childress notes how this fear of self-betrayal plays out in cases in which appeals to conscience are made. This fear of self-disintegration is heard in testimonies where it is expressed in terms such as "'I could not live with myself'; 'A man has to answer to himself first'; 'I must protect my sense of self.' Or, 'I could answer it, but if I did, I would hate myself in the morning.' Or, 'I could not look myself in the mirror.'"[514] Claims such as these witness to the way in which the coherence of personal identity depends upon having the freedom to the act in accordance with the dictates of conscience.

While there is no means of testing a person's sincerity regarding what his conscience is said to dictate, there have been efforts to establish whether the deliveries of conscience are in fact conscientious. For examples, tribunals for individuals claiming conscientious objector status to war-time service are tasked with determining whether a person who claims to have a conscientious objection is telling the truth about what he claims his conscience requires him to do. In making a determination about whether the law should defer to a person's claim of objector status and grant exemption from compulsory military service, such a tribunal is not expected to take into account the validity or otherwise of the objector's position in opposing war. For what matters is not the validity of the moral claims on which his decision of conscience is based but that it is the decision of his conscience. Nevertheless, claims of conscience to oppose war service on the basis of moral, political, economic or philosophical convictions have not been granted the same authority (and hence legal accommodation) as claims of conscience made on the basis of religious convictions, defined by membership in a recognized pacifist denomination or by specifically religious training

---

conscience and liberal democratic notions of liberty, equality, and identity, see Edward G. Andrew, *Conscience and Its Critics: Protestant Conscience, Enlightenment Reason, and Modern Subjectivity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Michael Sandel helpfully problematizes readings of the relationship between individual conscience and liberal political traditions that are overly cosy. He argues that the version of liberalism implicit in US constitutional law depreciates the claims of conscience and of religion, because it fails to respect the values and ends that individuals have not have not chosen, such as the duties derived from sources other than themselves. Michael J. Sandel, "Freedom of Conscience or Freedom of Choice?," in *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace: The Religious Liberty Clauses and the American Public Philosophy*, ed. James D. Hunter and Os Guinness (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990).

[514] Childress draws on the testimonies offered by the playwright Arthur Miller, who refused to name other writers suspected of being Communists before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, by Governor Winthrop Rockefeller of Arkansas who commuted the sentences of fifteen prisoners on death row, and by Captain Michael Heck who refused to continue to obey orders to fly more bombing missions in Vietnam. James F. Childress, "Appeals to Conscience," *Ethics* 89, no. 4 (1979): 316-17.

and belief.[515] That is not because religious views were treated as intrinsically valid but because they were treated as more central to a person's life, more constitutive of a person's identity and thus more obligating than views that were formed from political, philosophical or moral considerations.

The difficulty that arises here is that the authority of conscience derives simply from the fact that a person possesses a sense of certainty about the claims that his conscience makes on him. It does not say anything about what those claims are, apart from how central those claims are to his sense of identity. Moreover, it is not the validity of the claim that needs to be verified but whether the individual treats that claim as morally obligating. Therefore, there is no imperative to provide an account of the goods that motivate our moral commitments and no need to explain how one's conscientious action might align with our moral commitments. What determines whether a claim of conscience is morally obligating for someone is the intensity of belief in that course of action and the centrality of that belief to an individual's life. So, claims of conscience are assessed as having authority and worthy of respect, solely based on their importance in expressing a person's moral integrity and autonomy, and, by extension, on their centrality to a person's moral identity.[516]

A number of difficulties arise in accommodating the claims of conscience based on felt commitments viewed as central to a person's life. I have space to mention just one problem presented in this understanding of the authority of conscience that stems from the formalism of conscience: in theory a person could claim that any action might violate his conscience and threaten him with a loss of identity and integrity, as there is no clear ostensive meaning offered as to its basis. If respect for conscience is reduced to the intensity or centrality of an individual's conviction about a particular notion of what is right or wrong that must be

[515] In 1957, Daniel Seeger claimed conscientious objector status, declaring to the draft board that he was opposed to participating in war on the basis not of religious beliefs but on beliefs that he had come to base on reading the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, John Dewey and Henry David Thoreau. The federal district court denied Seeger's claim and convicted him for refusing to submit to induction, a conviction that the court of appeals affirmed but that the US Supreme Court later reversed in order to make equal space for religious and nonreligious moral convictions. For a more extended discussion of cases defining the nature of conscience with respect to exemption from compulsory military service and for a treatment of the *Seeger v. United States* case in particular, see Vischer, *Conscience and the Common Good: Reclaiming the Space between Person and State*, 15-47. Vischer is concerned with how to resolve disputes involving conscience in US court decisions without resorting to claims of an individual's rights. He wants to see a better legal framework developed for respecting conscience.

[516] Elizabeth Sepper asserts that, "an individual's moral integrity offers the most compelling moral basis for respecting her conscience. In a liberal pluralistic society, the objective truth or falsity of an individual's moral commitments cannot form the justification for determining when to accommodate conscience." Elizabeth Sepper, "Taking Conscience Seriously," *Virginia Law Review* 98 (2012): 1529.

heeded for fear of loss of identity or integrity, claims of conscience become indistinguishable from fiats of will.[517] Without a fuller explanation, a Muslim teacher's decision to wear a scarf at work can be equated with her colleague's choice to wear a baseball hat.

What is more, locating the authority of conscience in the certainty with which the decision is made and in the centrality of that decision to a person's sense of self, collapses discussions of conscience into assertions of will, effectively robbing such discussions of their moral dimension, as we saw in Hegel's morality tale when the beautiful soul tried to present individual will as a justified norm. From a theological perspective, making decisions of conscience can be seen to contribute to personal integrity and moral autonomy, but liberty of conscience need not treated only as a means to those ends. The moral convictions at the heart of claims of conscience are in fact perceptions of realities that have sources outside the self.

If we accept strong moral motivations, which have sources outside the self, there is no longer any need to shore up the authority of conscience. To put it plainly, decisions of conscience do not possess any authority or imperative of their own. Any authority a claim of conscience has derives from the realities that it assents to. As Herbert McCabe puts it, "it is not the strength and sincerity of my conviction that the use of nuclear weapons must always be evil, but rather the grounds for this conviction, that make it morally right for me to refuse cooperation with any such use."[518] That is because the overriding authority of conscience, experienced as pure necessity, is a response to realities that have a source that is external to the self and society, though those realities are discerned in and through them.

The point of the absolute authority of conscience is that once we have discovered the truth of a doubt-filled situation, or think we have, we can do nothing else with integrity except to assent to it. The imperative to follow my conscience does not stem solely out of concern to express a conviction within me but out of an acknowledgement of the truth of the reality

[517] My point here is that the most common ways of defending the normative significance of conscience actually undermine its normativity. That includes the argument that conscience must be respected to avoid the psychological distress that compelling a person to violate conscience will cause. It also includes as the argument that decisions of conscience made by others should be respected on the grounds that we would want our decisions of conscience to be respected, and other contractualist accounts of conscience, which reduce the reasons for a decision of conscience to individual importance or preference.
[518] McCabe, "Aquinas and Good Sense."

around me, which grounds my conviction.[519] Obedience to that truth compels me such that I am put in a position where there simply is no choice about doing what conscience dictates must be done if I am to be faithful to the truth I acknowledge. Either conscience has the final word, or I must act against my better judgment and deny something in myself about what my integrity, wholeness, and growth as this particular person requires or forbids here and now, but also, and perhaps more importantly, deny something about the reality I have apprehended. Here I want to affirm the power of that reality to motivate our moral actions and also the necessity to give some account of it. As conscience is formal, the truth it is acknowledging needs to be stated. It is not self-explanatory.

Where decisions of conscience differ from other moral decisions

The picture of conscience that I have been building up here to counter moral inarticulacy views the concept as a discourse about moral decision making. It is a discourse that asks not only "What must I do?" but also often tries to discern "What is God calling me to do?" The key features of conscience I have proposed here are these: conscience is human, fallible, subject to formation and deformation, shaped by our beliefs about ourselves, shaped by beliefs about the world around us, and experienced as uncompromising because it responds to the good. Such a proposal raises several questions. For instance, in speaking of conscience in this way am I simply speaking of practical reason or of self-conscious agency? What does calling this highly personal mode of decision-making "conscience" actually add? To see how decisions of conscience differ from other kinds of moral decisions, it is important to note when matters of conscience arise. Conscience is only said to be pricked, troubled, examined and then invoked in specific situations; conscience has to do with "a particular moment in our moral self-presentation when we hit a bump in the road," as Rowan Williams put it.

Historically, these circumstances have been sparked by political, social or ecclesial conflicts that have created crises of authority. As C.A. Pierce noted, "It is clear that conscience only

[519] The Christian tradition has not been consistent in affirming that it is reality itself that ultimately motivates action and there are long standing disagreements over the status of the authority of conscience, which have intensified after Vatican II. What I am asserting is that the authority of a decision of conscience derives from the realities that such a decision assent to, and that that decision of conscience does not possesses any authority or imperative of its own. In his genealogy of conscience, John Lamont attributes to Suarez the view that conscience possesses an authority of its own, a view that later came to dominate the counter-Reformation tradition. Lamont, "Conscience, Freedom, Rights: Idols of the Enlightenment," *The Thomist*, vol. 73, no. 2, April 2009, 180-81.

came into its own in the Greek world after the collapse of the city-state. The close integration of politics with ethics, with the former predominant, was no longer possible: there was no sufficiently close authority, external to the individual, effectively to direct conduct. Consequently, as a *pis aller*, men fell back on the internal chastisement of conscience as the only authority."[520] In periods in which traditional authority structures are eroding under the pressures of societal change, appeals are made not to traditional norms but to emerging ones.[521] And in such contexts claims of conscience come to the fore and get voiced where other justifications for actions or ways of living stop.

Appeals to conscience are not only commonplace during crises of authority when we can no longer argue our position in universally valid terms. Conscience also becomes salient when we perceive different spheres of normativity coming into conflict in the course of our deliberations. In these instances, I may appeal to conscience not because I demand to be made an exception but because my actions seem governed by more than one norm both of which are decisive for me. These situations arise by virtue of relating to multiple communities and institutions. I may have specific obligations with my family, with my church, with my place of work, with the civic and professional organizations with which I am involved, with my community and with my country.[522] Such communities and institutions provide the context whereby objective morality takes shape in our lives and provide the practices with which the dictates of conscience are discerned, articulated and lived out. The communities and institutions to which we belong also compete in structuring our lives and may lay claims to our loyalties in conflicting ways when we are trying to discern what we ought to do. Multiple moral mandates produce conflicting obligations. This is especially characteristic of societies which partition social life into different spheres each with their own normative expectations, such that what is deemed right in the home is one thing, in the corporate sphere another, and in the political arena something else again.[523]

---

[520] Claude A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 76.

[521] See, for example, Christopher Hill's depiction of the crisis of authority in seventeenth-century England. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Group, 1991).

[522] David McCarthy is particularly interested in faithful decision making according to conscience in pluralistic contexts that are not delimited by the bounds of the institutional church. See McCarthy, "Veritatis Splendor: Conscience and Following Christ."

[523] Alisdair MacIntyre has examined the effects of this compartmentalisation of society on academic philosophical enquiry and on contemporary politics over a number of years. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, "What

When a person appeals to his or her conscience saying, "My conscience tells me to do X," it can indicate that that person finds himself in circumstances that force him to decide between alternate moral visions, where choosing to act according to what is prescribed by one normative framework will mean falling short of or departing from moral standards prescribed by another. In such circumstances, I must decide among the various conflicting values at stake. I may be committed to following a course of action in accord with convictions shaped in one moral sphere, while recognizing that doing so will preclude me from following convictions in another sphere. Conscience is typically invoked in such situations of conflict or perplexity where it appears that I must choose between incommensurables and violate some of my standards or interests. Conscience is then the name given to the judgment made in those instances where what I believe is required of me clashes with other moral laws. In those instances, appeals to conscience are made in the course of explaining an action that a person believes he must take, whether to justify it to himself or to others, and in the process of giving an account of one's conduct and trying to dispel suspicions about his motives in abrogating a moral law.[524]

While issues of conscience can ignite disagreement between people, it should now be clear that they can also generate cognitive conflict within a person. James Childress and David McCarthy in their separate ways have drawn attention to the fact that conflict between moral principles often experienced as a conflict within oneself.[525] Nevertheless, it is still common to belittle an agent's claim of conscience as a demand to be made an exception to a rule, rather than appreciating that the agent's actions are governed under the circumstances by more than one norm or obligation.[526] Having to decide between my moral convictions and commitments can threaten my sense of moral coherence, not merely by throwing my behavior into question but by demanding a radical reassessment of my moral beliefs and standards. Have a really understood what is essential to my identity? Have a truly determined what is important and what is the worthiest cause to serve? In this way, my predicament can call into question the very means available to me for making evaluations, challenging the formulas and categories that seemed most fundamental to me.

Has Not Happened in Moral Philosophy," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, no. 5 (1992). "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good," in *The Macintyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

[524] This is not to reduce a claim of conscience to an excuse mechanism but merely to emphasize that it has an explanatory role.

[525] McCarthy, "Veritatis Splendor: Conscience and Following Christ," 48; Childress, "Appeals to Conscience," 321-2.

[526] As does Karl Rahner in his efforts to counter overly-subjective views of conscience. Rahner, *Nature and Grace: And Other Essays*, 84-111.

In that decisions of conscience can force me to re-evaluate how I have been formulating what is most important to me they can provoke crises of moral identity and agency. That provocation can cause us to stick stubbornly to certain favorite terms and try to settle all issues about actions in these terms, refusing any radical questioning. Alternatively, the question about whether we have got our most inchoate evaluations right, can provoke us to struggle with those terms that come most readily to hand. That struggle can generate a gestalt shift in our view of the situation, so that out of the confusion and uncertainty we find new, more adequate terms in which to see our predicament, which we could not properly conceive of before.

Conclusion

If we take an open stance to strong moral motivations, then conscience acquires certain distinctive features. First of all, conscience can be treated as a learned discourse. It is an aspect of human agency that is liable to error and failure but also malleable to processes of formation (as well as deformation). Conscience, understood as a kind of discourse about moral decision-making, is conditioned by my beliefs about myself and it therefore requires a certain degree of self-awareness. This means coming to know myself in and through a community of persons rather than simply in solitary introspection. Conscience is also conditioned by my beliefs about how things are with the world at large. A degree of realism is therefore required to avoid reducing our understanding of how things are in ourselves and in the world to what can be generated merely by what we will or desire to be the case.

Claims of conscience exert an imperative force that obligates the agent to act in accordance with them. From a theological perspective, the authority of conscience does not need to be established on the basis of infallibility or by equating the voice of conscience with the voice of God. Nor is the authority of conscience relativized by efforts to attribute claims of conscience to naturalistic sources, as if they were merely reflection of subjective inclinations or social conditioning. Instead, the "voice of conscience" can be understood as something we have constructed for ourselves from a variety of sources, taking into account our personal experience and self-knowledge, our apprehension of the truth of the world around us, religious teaching, social teaching, our feelings and intuitions. Rather than conferring decisions of conscience with any imperative of their own (either by virtue of their source or by virtue of their role in building up moral autonomy and integrity) this the authority of a

claim of conscience can be understood to derive from the reality to which it assents. That reality has a source that is external to the self and society, though it is discerned in and through them. Lastly, this chapter distinguished decisions of conscience from other forms of decision making, by considering when matters of conscience arise. Developing these features of conscience offers a promising starting place for the development of a new account of conscience and an alternative to cultivating our own moral beauty.

Conclusion

This thesis began with twentieth-century attempts to manage the problem of conscience and to make sense of the ambiguities that have plagued conscience over the course of its history (chapter I.) I assessed efforts to situate conscience in its semantic context, showing why they fail to tell the whole story. I also evaluated other approaches that extend beyond the semantics of conscience but do not extend far enough. I argued that all these strategies obscure two aspects of conscience which need to be reasserted in re-working conscience: the formalism of conscience and the normativity of conscience. Moreover, these strategies deflect attention from the fact that the formalism of conscience undermines its purported normativity. I also showed that efforts to rework conscience that fail to appreciate that conscience can mean anything, in the absence of a rich account of its particular social, political, metaphysical and linguistic context, create situations in which conscience ends up doing everything.

One of my contentions in this thesis is that claims of conscience in modern culture are largely a front, a way of hiding from ourselves and others our inability to articulate what really motivates us. I examined why claims of conscience are so often treated as if they were actual (as in 'conscience made me do it') rather than formal, in light of Charles Taylor's critique of modern moral theories (chapter II). Turning to Taylor's discussions of moral inarticulacy allowed me to situate conscience within the unresolved debates of modernity. I unspooled Taylor's thesis about secularization (that neither religion nor its alternatives can be seen to provide all of society with normative foundations) and his thesis about the "malaise of immanence" (that comes from not having moral sources capable of creating a sufficiently firm identification with the common good to allow us to live up to our own moral commitments), and showed why it is difficult to provide reasons that would make plain the moral motivations behind claims of conscience. I also examined Taylor's proposal that giving transcendent love credence as a strong moral motivation would help overcome moral inarticulacy and concluded that drawing upon sources outside the self would might correct our over reliance on conscience-talk.

The illustrative figure of the beautiful soul portrays what following individual conscience looks like under the conditions Taylor described (which was established in chapter III). The beautiful soul of the "Confessions" found in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister,* depicts one response

to having weak moral sources, which is to turn away from the needs of the world and the demands of universal justice and benevolence, and to focus on smaller goals. Overwhelmed by those demands, the beautiful soul decides to construct a life for herself that is internally consistent, beautifully harmonized and free from the taint of compromise. She imagines that it will be purifying and that it will give her peace within. She identifies the life she wants to lead with the life of conscience. To live in that way, Goethe's beautiful soul will be steered only by the inclinations that stem from the law of her heart, something she tries to achieve by systematically extricating herself from social roles and responsibilities, external influences and physical constraints. In so doing, the figure of the beautiful soul shows what it looks like to try to generate ethical ideals and moral practices with nothing but one's own mind and will. My re-narration of Goethe's beautiful soul also allowed us to see why cultivating a beautiful soul might be a perennial modern temptation.

While trying to live according to conscience may seem like a perfectly reasonable response when overwhelmed by the needs of the world and the universal demand for justice and benevolence, it is a risky strategy. In my narration of the fate of the beautiful soul in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, it is shown to be both futile and counter-productive (as chapter IV established). Cultivating a beautiful soul is futile because there is no way of living in the world and doing no harm. And when we realize we are still complicit, despite our best efforts to extricate ourselves, we are liable to give up. Cultivating a beautiful soul is also counter-productive, because it does not do any good to aim for our own purity or integrity. When we make that our aim, we become solipsistic and narcissistic; we become focused on our own personal project rather than aiming to make the bigger, more systemic changes needed. Focusing on what I can do in my own sphere for the sake of my conscience forecloses social practices and forms of solidarity, whereas many of the wrongs that need to be righted in the world can only be adequately addressed by collective, coalitional responses. Hegel's verdict is that we cannot escape the moral crises of our age by retreating from them but that we can confess the ways in which we are implicated in them. That means acknowledging the difficulties concerning our place in society, recognizing the need to work through complex situations with others and participating in institutional life.

Familiarity with Hegel's cautionary tale would have helped Arendt anticipate some of the pitfalls she ran into while trying to re-work conscience (chapter V). I laid out Arendt's attempt to address the problem of conscience after Eichmann's trial and showed how she

reworked Socratic conscience into an inner principle, connected to thinking and judging. In construing conscience as an offshoot of the thinking process, Arendt reinforced the view of conscience as a solidary moral decision. As a result, she failed to see the role that the dispositions, habits and virtues one does (or does not) have plays in the way one apprehends the moral terrain.

The problem of conscience is that it is both formal and normative, but Arendt's efforts to rework conscience maintained the formal procedure of conscience as encapsulated in the question "What must I do to be able to live with myself?" at the cost of maintaining the normative dimension. I argued that if conscience is to be normative, then it also needs social existence and public practices with which it can communicate and instantiate its claim to be about the good. Formalism requires some way of mediating a principled moral standpoint with actual historical and social practices. So, formalism of conscience necessitates a political ethic that can consider the creation of institutions, the formation of practices, and the sustaining of civic values and virtues–such as love–strong enough to inspire, motivate and sustain the modern moral order's universalist-egalitarian commitments. That is simply not possible in Arendt's scheme, which is designed to keep love out of politics. By enforcing a separation between what is private and what is public, and between what is moral and what is political, Arendt robbed conscience of a place in public life where it could have been shaped by goods held in common and mutual recognition might have been possible. When conscience is placed in a private sphere separated from actual historical, social and cultural practices, it falls apart and the consciousness of the beautiful soul re-emerges. This is why Gillian Rose criticized Arendt for succumbing to the temptation of the beautiful soul and representing, phenomenologically, Germany during the transition from Social Democracy to totalitarian rule.

Elaborating on Rose's insights, I conclude that if we are going to continue to appeal to conscience in moral matters without being diverted by the project of cultivating beautiful souls, then we need to be emphatic that (1) ethics is about more than decision-making and that (2) ethics is inseparable from politics. As to the first point, ethics is more fundamentally about habits than about decisions. It is not that moral decisions are unimportant–indeed the chapter IV outlined why it is best to view conscience as a discourse about moral decision-making–but that our decisions are not *all* important. After all, it is the habits you

practice that determine what choices you think you have to decide from. As to the second point, getting the relation between ethics and politics right requires theorizing from another standpoint. Until that happens, conscience and all its problems will continue to call attention to the inadequate relationship between ethics and politics.

If we align conscience with a more substantive account of the good and take an open stance towards the idea of self-giving Christian love, as Taylor proposes, then conscience acquires certain distinctive features (chapter VI). First of all, conscience can be treated as a learned discourse, and as form of human agency. It is therefore liable to error and failure but also malleable to processes of formation. Conscience, understood as a discourse about moral decision-making, is conditioned by my beliefs about myself and it therefore requires a certain degree of reflexive self-awareness. Reflexive self-awareness entails coming to know myself in and through a community of persons rather than in solitary introspection. Conscience is also conditioned by my beliefs about how things are with the world at large. A degree of realism is therefore required to avoid reducing our understanding of how things are in ourselves and in the world to what can be generated merely by what we will or desire to be the case.

From a theological perspective, the authority of conscience does not need to be established on the basis of infallibility or by equating the voice of conscience with the voice of God. Nor is the authority of conscience relativized by efforts to attribute claims of conscience to naturalistic sources, as if they were merely reflective of subjective inclinations or social conditioning. Instead, the "voice of conscience" can be understood as something we have constructed for ourselves from a variety of sources, taking into account our personal experience and self-knowledge, our apprehension of the truth of the world around us, religious teaching, social teaching, our feelings and intuitions. Rather than treating conscience as having its own authority, the imperative nature of conscience can be understood as deriving from the reality to which it assents. That reality has a source that is external to the self and society, though it is discerned in and through them. Developing these features of conscience gives us a real shot at affirming both the formalism and normativity of conscience, as well as an alternative to cultivating our self-images as beautiful souls, even if the temptation needs to be overcome in any reworking of conscience.

As we saw, Charles Pierce observed that people tend to fall back on the authority of conscience during the breakdown of the nation-state, when politics is no longer integrated with ethics and there is no longer any sufficiently close authority, external to the individual, that can direct conduct effectively. The divisions that characterize the political landscape in the wake of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States have been correlated with the breakdown of the nation-state, the rise of populism and the distrust of authority and of truth.[527] These are the very circumstances in which men and women increasingly fall back on conscience as the only source of moral authority, so it is more important than ever to understand the dangers of becoming a beautiful soul.

The individual searching for a way through the challenges of this age does have an alternative to cultivating a beautiful soul. On a theoretical level, the way to avoid becoming a beautiful soul is to maintain the formalism and normatively of conscience. On a practical level, the way to avoid becoming a beautiful soul is to be wary of making claims of conscience in public discourse, especially in the current climate where many maintain that they have the right to spread false assertions and alternative facts as true if they truly believe they are right. Given that the language of conscience is not likely to go out of currency, the challenge for the time being will be to use claims of conscience economically in public discourse, and to act, as Rose put it, not on behalf of our own "damaged good" but to take the biggest risk of all, and act for "the universal interest."

[527] For a recent critical analysis of those political debates in light of Gillian Rose's reflections, see Anna Rowlands, "Beginning in the Middle: The Third City and the Politics of Membership," in *Misrecognitions: Gillian Rose and the Task of Political Theology*, ed. Joshua B. Davis (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018).

Bibliography

Abbey, Ruth. "Theorizing Secularity 3." In *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, edited by Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, 98-124. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.

Andrew, Edward G. *Conscience and Its Critics: Protestant Conscience, Enlightenment Reason, and Modern Subjectivity.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Questiones Disputatae De Veritate.* Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952.

Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future.* Edited by Jerome Kohn. London: Penguin, 2006.

———. "Civil Disobedience." In *Crises of the Republic*, 49-102. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

———. "Collective Responsibility." In *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited by John Kohn, 147-58. New York: Schocken, 2003.

———. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* New York: Viking Press, 1965.

———. *The Human Condition: Second Edition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

———. *The Life of the Mind: The Groundbreaking Investigation on How We Think.* Vol. 1, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981.

———. *Love and Saint Augustine.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

———. *Men in Dark Times.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970.

———. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* London: Penguin Books Limited, 2017.

———. "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship." Edited by Jerome Kohn, 17-48. Responsibility and Judgment. New York: Schocken, 2003.

———. "Philosophy and Politics." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 427-54.

———. "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century. Lecture Notes. The New School for Social Research. Series: Subject File, 1949-1975." *The Hannah Arendt Papers* (1968). https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendtthtml/series.html

———. *The Promise of Politics.* New York: Schocken Books, 2005.

———. *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess.* Translated by Richard Winston and Clare Winston. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

———. *Responsibility and Judgment.* New York: Schocken Books, 2003.

———. "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." In *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited by John Kohn, 49-146: Schocken, 2003.

———. "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture." *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971): 417-46.

Arendt, Hannah, Gerschom Scholem, Marie Louise Knott, and Anthony David. *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Barth, Karl, and Dietrich Braun. *Ethics.* New York: Seabury Press, 1981.

Baugh, Bruce. *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism.* London: Routledge, 2003.

Baylor, Michael G. *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther.* Leiden: Brill, 1977.

Beck, Julie. "The Folly of 'Purity Politics': An Interview with Alexis Shotwell." *The Atlantic* (2017). Published electronically Jan 20. https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/01/purity-politics/513704/

Beddow, Michael. *The Fiction of Humanity: Studies in the Bildungsroman from Wieland to Thomas Mann.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Beiner, Ronald. "Love and Worldliness: Hannah Arendt's Reading of Saint Augustine." Chap. 12 In *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, edited by L. May and J. Kohn, 269-84. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.

Benhabib, Seyla. "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*." Chap. 3 In *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, edited by D. Villa, 65-85. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

———. "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought." *Political Theory* 16, no. 1 (1988): 29-51.

———. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Bernstein, Richard J. "Arendt on Thinking." Chap. 14 In *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, edited by D. Villa, 277-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

———. "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?" Chap. 6 In *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, edited by Larry May and Jerome Kohn, 127- 46. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.

Billy, Dennis J., and James Keating. *Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology.* Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001.

Boyle, Nicholas. *Goethe: The Poet and the Age. Vol. 2, Revolution and Renunciation, 1790-1803.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Brandom, Robert. *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Breidenthal, Thomas. "Jesus Is My Neighbor: Arendt, Augustine, and the Politics of Incarnation." *Modern Theology* 14, no. 4 (October 2002): 489-503.

Bretherton, Luke. *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans 2019.

Brownlee, Timothy. "Conscience and Religion in Hegel's Later Political Philosophy." *The Owl of Minerva* 43, no. 1-2 (2011-12): 41-72.

Buckler, Steve. "Ethics and the Vocation of Politics." In *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, edited by A. Yeatman, C. Barbour, P. Hansen and M. Zolkos, 117-33. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.

Buechler, Ralph W. "Germany, Austria, Switzerland: 17th-and 18th-Century Auto/Biography." In *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly. London: Routledge, 2013.

Callahan, Sidney C. *In Good Conscience: Reason and Emotion in Moral Decision Making.* San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991.

Canovan, Margaret. *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge Universitty Press, 1992.

Childress, James F. "Appeals to Conscience." *Ethics* 89, no. 4 (1979): 315-35.

Chrysostom, John. *On Wealth and Poverty.* Translated by Catharine P. Roth. Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.

Church, Catholic. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium Et Spes.* Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1965.

Clairvaux, Bernard. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons on the Song of Songs.* Translated by Irene Edmonds. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1980.

Coles, Stanley Hauerwas and Romand. "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on *A Secular Age*." *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010): 349-62.

Colorado, Carlos D. "Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self." Chap. 3 In *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, edited by Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, 73-97. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.

Conn, Walter E. *Conscience: Development and Self-Transcendence.* Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1981.
Curran, Charles E. *Conscience.* Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2004.
Curran, Jane Veronica. *Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship: A Reader's Commentary.* Rochester: Camden House, 2002.
D'Arcy, Eric. *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom.* London: Sheed and Ward, 1961.
D'entreves, Maurizio Passerin. "Arendt's Theory of Judgment." Chap. 12 In *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 245-60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
De Nys, Martin J. "Conscience and Ethical Life." *The Owl of Minerva* 43, no. 1-2 (2011): 139-47.
de Vries, Hent. "The Deep Conditions of Secularity." *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010): 382-403.
Deiulio, Laura. "The Voice of the *Schöne Seele*." In *Challenging Separate Spheres: Female Bildung in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Germany*, edited by M.E. Goozé, 93-108 Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.
Delhaye, Philippe, and Charles Underhill Quinn. *The Christian Conscience.* New York: Desclee, 1968.
Ellison, David R. *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Women and War.* New York: Basic Books, 1987.
Feldman, Karen S. *Binding Words: Conscience and Rhetoric in Hobbes, Hegel, and Heidegger.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006.
Field-Bibb, Jacqueline. *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
Fingarette, Herbert. *Self-Deception.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
Gay, Peter. *The Naked Heart: Bourgeois Experience Victoria to Freud.* London: HarperCollins, 1996.
Gilby, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae: Volume 18, Principles of Morality: 1a2ae. 18-21.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Glaser, John W. "Conscience and Super-Ego: A Key Distinction." *Theological Studies* 32 (1971): 30-47.
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, Eric A. Blackall, and Victor Lange. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
Gram, Moltke S. "Moral and Literary Ideals in Hegel's Critique of 'The Moral World-View.'" In *The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by Jon Stewart, 307-33. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
Greene, Robert A. "Whichcote, the Candle of the Lord, and Synderesis." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 4 (1991): 617-44.
Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
Griffin, Leslie C. "The Catholic Bishops vs. The Contraceptive Mandate." *Religions* 6 (2015): 1411-32.
Guignon, Charles. *On Being Authentic.* Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2004.
Gula, Richard M. *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality.* Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989.
Haas, John M. *Crisis of Conscience.* New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.
Hammond, Guyton B. *Conscience and Its Recovery: From the Frankfurt School to Feminism.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.

Hanigan, James P. "Conscience and the Holy Spirit." *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 51 (1996): 227-46.
Hansen, Phillip. "Individual Responsibility and Political Authority Hannah Arendt at the Intersection of Moral and Political Philosophy." In *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, edited by Anna Yeatman, Charles Barbour, Phillip Hansen and Magdalena Zolkos, 134-49. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.
Harris, Henry S. *Hegel: Phenomenology and System.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995.
———. *Hegel's Ladder.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
Hauerwas, Stanley. "Casuistry as a Narrative Art." *Interpretation* 37, no. 4 (1983): 377-88.
———. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right.* Translated by H.B. Nisbet. Edited by A.W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
———. *Phenomenology of Spirit* Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977.
———. "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate." In *Early Theological Writings*, edited by T.M. Knox and R. Kroner, 182-301. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.
Herdt, Jennifer A. "The Authentic Individual in the Network of Agape." Chap. 7 In *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, edited by Carlos Colorado and Justin Klassen, 191-216. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.
———. "Between *Imago Dei* and the *Bildungsroman*: Ethical Formation for Our World." New Haven: Yale Divinity School, 2009.
———. *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming, 2019.
Hill, Christopher. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution.* London: Penguin Group, 1991.
Hill, Thomas E. "Four Conceptions of Conscience." In *Integrity and Conscience*, edited by Ian Shapiro and Robert Adams, 13-52. New York: New York University Press 1998.
Hirsch, Mirianne. "Spiritual Bildung: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm." In *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, edited by Mirianne Hirsch Elizabeth Abel, Elizabeth Langland, 23-48. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983.
Hogan, Linda. *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition.* New York: Paulist Press, 2000.
Holsclaw, Geoffrey. *Transcending Subjects: Augustine, Hegel and Theology.* Challenges in Contemporary Theology. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.
Howard, Jason J. "Translating Convictions into a Clear Conscience." *The Owl of Minerva* 43, no. 1-2 (2011): 107-23.
Hyppolite, Jean. *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* Translated by S.Cherniak and J. Heckman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.
Inwood, Michael. *Phenomenology of Spirit: Translated with Introduction and Commentary.* Oxford Oxford University Press, 2018.
Jackson, Timothy P. *Political Agape: Christian Love and Liberal Democracy.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015.

Jacobitti, Suzanne D. "Thinking About the Self." Chap. 9 In *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, edited by Larry May and Jerome Kohn, 199-220. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.
Jager, Erice. *The Book of the Heart.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
Janz, Paul D. "Transcendence, 'Spin', and the Jamesian Open Space." Chap. 2 In *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age*, edited by Justin D. Klassen and Carlos D. Colorado, 39-70. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.
Jones, L. Gregory. *Transformed Judgment.* Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990.
Jonsen, Albert R., and Stephen E. Toulmin. *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
Kampowski, Stephan. *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.
Kant, Immanuel. *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kateb, George. *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil.* Lanham: Rowman & Allanheld, 1987.
Kazim, Emre. *Kant on Conscience: A Unified Approach to Moral Self-Consciousness.* Leiden: Brill, 2017.
Keane, Webb. *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
Keenan, James F. "The Return of Casuistry." *Theological Studies* 57, no. 1 (1996): 123-39.
Kerr, Fergus. "How Much Can a Philosopher Do?" *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010): 321-36.
Kiess, John. *Hannah Arendt and Theology.* London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016.
Klassen, Justin D. "The Affirmation of Existential Life in Charles Taylor's a Secular Age." Chap. 1 In *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, edited by Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, 13-38. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.
Konersmann, Ralf. "Seele, Schöne.' In *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, edited by Joachim Ritter u. Karlfried Gründer, 89-92. Basel 1995.
Kries, Douglas. "Origen, Plato, and Conscience (*Synderesis*) in Jerome's Ezekiel Commentary.' *Traditio* 57 (2002): 67-83.
Krimstein, Ken. *The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt: A Tyranny of Truth.* New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2018.
Kymlicka, Will. "The Ethics of Inarticulacy." *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (June 1991): 155-82.
La Caze, Marguerite. "The Miraculous Power of Forgiveness and the Promise." Chap. 11 In *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*, edited by Anna Yeatman, Charles Barbour, Philip Hansen and Magdalena Zolkos, 150-65. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001.
Lacan, Jacques. *The Language of the Self.* Translated by Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968.
Lamont, John R. "Conscience, Freedom, Rights: Idols of the Enlightenment." *The Thomist* 73, no. 2 (2009): 169-239.
Langston, Douglas C. *Conscience and Other Virtues.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.
Lauer, Quentin. *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit.* New York: Fordham University Press, 1993.
Lehmann, Paul Louis. *Ethics in a Christian Context.* London: SCM Press, 1963.
Lewis, C.S. *Studies in Words.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Librett, Jeffrey S. "Rhapsodic Dispositions: Engenderments of the Ground in the Discourse of the 'Beautiful Soul' (Shaftesbury, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger)." Ithaca: Cornell University, 1989.
Liu, Lydia H. "Shadows of Universalism: The Untold Story of Human Rights around 1948." *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (2014): 385–417.
Lloyd, Vincent. "On the Use of Gillian Rose." *Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 5 (Sept 2007): 697-706.
Lonzi, Carla. "Let's Spit on Hegel." Translated by Veronica Newman. In *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, edited by Patricia J. Mills. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Social Practice: What Holds Them Apart?" In *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, 104-22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
———. "Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good." In *The Macintyre Reader*, edited by Kelvin Knight, 235–66. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.
———. "The Recovery of Moral Agency?" In *The Best Christian Writing 2000*, edited by John Wilson, 110-36. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000.
———. "What Has Not Happened in Moral Philosophy." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, no. 5 (1992): 193-9.
Maclure, Jocelyn, and Charles Taylor. *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
Mahony, Deirdre L. *Hannah Arendt's Ethics.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.
Mathewes, Charles T. "Pluralism, Otherness, and the Augustinian Tradition." *Modern Theology* 14, no. 1 (1998): 83-112.
McCabe, Herbert. "Aquinas and Good Sense." *New Blackfriars* 67, no. 798 (1986): 419-31.
McCarthy, David Matzko. "Veritatis Splendor: Conscience and Following Christ." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 8, no. 2 (October 1995): 36-53.
McGinn, Colin. *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
Melina, Livio. "Moral Conscience and *Communio*: Toward a Response to the Challenge of Ethical Pluralism." *Communio* 20, no. Winter (1992): 673-86.
Miller, Donald E. *The Wing-Footed Wanderer: Conscience and Transcendence.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977.
Miller, Richard B. *Casuistry and Modern Ethics: A Poetics of Practical Reasoning.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
Milne, Drew. "The Beautiful Soul: From Hegel to Beckett." *Diacritics* 32, no. 1 (2002): 63-82.
Moretti, Franco, and Albert Sbragia. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture.* London: Verso, 2000.
Mount, Eric. *Conscience and Responsibility.* Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969.
Moyar, Dean. *Hegel's Conscience.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good.* London: Routledge, 1970.
Neaum, Rachel S. "A Response to the Use of 'Minority' in Sir Philip Mawer's Review." In *Women and the Church* 2017.
Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
Neuhouser, Frederick. *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
Norrie, Alan. *Law and the Beautiful Soul.* London: The Glass House Press, 2005.
Norris, Richard A. *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003.

Norton, Robert Edward. *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.
O'Connell, Timothy E. "An Understanding of Conscience." Chap. 2 In *Conscience: Readings in Moral Theology* edited by Charles E. Curran, 25-38. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.
O'Donovan, O. *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community: The 2001 Stob Lectures.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.
Ojakangas, Mika. *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience.* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
Pierce, Claude A. *Conscience in the New Testament.* London: SCM Press, 1955.
Pinckaers, Servais. "Conscience and the Christian Tradition." In *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, 321-34. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005.
———. "Conscience and the Virtue of Prudence." In *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, edited by John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus, 342-55. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005.
Pinkard, Terry. *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
———. "Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Logic*: An Overview." Chap. 8 In *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, edited by K. Ameriks, 161-79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
———. *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
———. "Norms, Facts and Forms of Life in the Phenomenology." (2009). https://terrypinkard.weebly.com/articles-for-downloading.html.
———. "Virtues, Morality, and *Sittlichkeit*: From Maxims to Practices." *European Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1999): 217-38.
———. "What Is a 'Shape of Spirit'?" Chap. 7 In *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, edited by Dean Moyar and Michael Quante, 112-29. Cambrige: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
Plotinus. *Enneads.* Translated by A. H. Armstrong. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.
Potts, Timothy C. *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Press, Eyal. *Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
Rahner, Karl. *Nature and Grace: And Other Essays.* New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963.
Redfield, Marc. *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman.* Ithaca, N.Y. ; London: Cornell University Press, 1996.
Rogers, Richard A. "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation." *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 474-503.
Rose, Gillian. *The Broken Middle.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
———. *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
———. *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
Rose, Matthew. "Tayloring Christianity." *First Things* (2014). http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/12/tayloring-christianity.

Rowlands, Anna. "Beginning in the Middle: The Third City and the Politics of Membership." Chap. 1 In *Misrecognitions: Gillian Rose and the Task of Political Theology*, edited by Joshua B. Davis, 29-46. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018.
Russon, John E. *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
Sandel, Michael J. "Freedom of Conscience or Freedom of Choice?" Chap. 5 In *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace: The Religious Liberty Clauses and the American Public Philosophy*, edited by James D. Hunter and Os Guinness, 74-92. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990.
Sax, Benjamin C. "Active Individuality and the Language of Confession: The Figure of the Beautiful Soul in the *Lehrjahre* and the *Phänomenologie*." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (1983): 437-66.
Schneewind, Jerome B. *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
Sepper, Elizabeth. "Taking Conscience Seriously." *Virginia Law Review* 98 (September 21 2012): 1501-73.
Shaftesbury, Lord. *Shaftesbury: Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times.* Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
Shapiro, Ian, and Robert Adams. *Integrity and Conscience: Nomos XL.* New York: New York University Press, 1998.
Shaw, Germain Grisez and Russell. "Conscience: Knowledge of Moral Truth." In *Conscience*, edited by C.E. Curran, 39-50. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2004.
Shotwell, Alexis. *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
Siedentop, Larry. *Inventing the Individual.* London: Penguin Books, 2006.
Siep, Ludwig. "The 'Aufhebung' of Morality in Ethical Life." In *Hegel's Philosophy of Action*, edited by L.S. Stepelevich, D. Lamb, Hegel Society of America and Hegel Society of Great Britain, 137-55. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1983.
Sjoberg, Laura. "Women Fighters and the 'Beautiful Soul' Narrative." *International Review of the Red Cross* 92, no. 877 (March 2010).
Smith, Christian. *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
Smith, James K. A. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.
Smith, Robert J. *Conscience and Catholicism: The Nature and Function of Conscience in Contemporary Roman Catholic Moral Theology.* Lanham: University Press of America, 1998.
Spaemann, Robert. *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something.'* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
Speight, Allen. *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
Staten, John C. *Conscience and the Reality of God.* New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988.
Steck, Christopher. "Re-Embedding Moral Agency." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 332-53.
———. "Saintly Voyeurism: A Methodological Necessity for the Christian Ethicist?" In *New Wine, New Wineskins: A Next Generation Reflects on Key Issues in Catholic Moral Theology*, edited by William C. Mattison, 25-44. London: Sheed & Ward, 2005.
Stephenson, Roger. "Review of Robert E. Norton, Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century." *Modern Language Review* (2001): 806-09.

Stringfellow, William. *Conscience and Obedience.* Wipf & Stock I, 2004.
Strohm, Paul. *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
Suttor, Timothy. *Summa Theologiae Man: Ia. 75-83.* Vol. 11: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Swales, Martin. *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
Tanner, Kathryn. *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology.* London: T&T Clark, 2001.
Taylor, Charles. *A Catholic Modernity?* Edited by James L. Heft. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
———. "Challenging Issues About the Secular Age." *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010): 404-16.
———. *The Ethics of Authenticity.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
———. *Hegel.* Cambridge: Cambridge Universityt Press, 1975.
———. *Modern Social Imaginaries.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
———. *A Secular Age.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
———. *Sources of the Self.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
Verene, Donald P. *Hegel's Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.
Vetlesen, Arne Johan. "Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 5 (2001): 1-33.
Villa, Dana. "Introduction." In *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, edited by Dana Villa, 1-21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
———. *Politics, Philosophy, Terror. Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
Vischer, Robert K. *Conscience and the Common Good: Reclaiming the Space between Person and State.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
Wainwright, William J. *Reason and the Heart: A Prologomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
Walzer, Michael. "Conscientious Objection." In *Obligations: Essys on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship*, 120-45. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.
Wand, Bernard. "The Content and Function of Conscience." *The Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 24 (1961): 765-72.
Webster, John. "God and Conscience." In *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics*, 147-65. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006.
Wellmon, Chad. *Becoming Human: Romantic Anthropology and the Embodiment of Freedom.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.
Westphal, Kenneth R. *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit.* Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2009.
Williams, Robert R. *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
Williams, Rowan D. "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose." *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 3-22.
———. "Making Moral Decisions." In *Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Robin Gill, 3-15. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
———. *On Augustine.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
———. "'Religious Realism': On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt." In *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, edited by Mike Higton, 228-54 Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.

———. "'The Sadness of the King': Gillian Rose, Hegel, and the Pathos of Reason." *Telos* no. 173, Winter (2015): 21-36.
Winters, Francis X. "The Banality of Virtue: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Reinterpretation of Political Ethics." In *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, edited by James W. Bernauer, 187-218. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.
Wokalek, Marie. *Die Schöne Seele: Eine Denkfigur: Zur Semantik Von Gewissen Und Geschmack Bei Rousseau, Wieland, Schiller, Goethe.* Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011.
Women, Archbishops' Commission on the Ministry of. *The Ministry of Women: Report of the Archbishops' Commission.* London: Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly, 1935.
Yeatman, Anna. "Individuality and Politics: Thinking with and Beyond Hannah Arendt." Chap. 6 In *Action and Appearance*, edited by Anna Yeatman, Charles Barbour, Philip Hansen and Magdalena Zolkos, 69-86. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.
Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.